

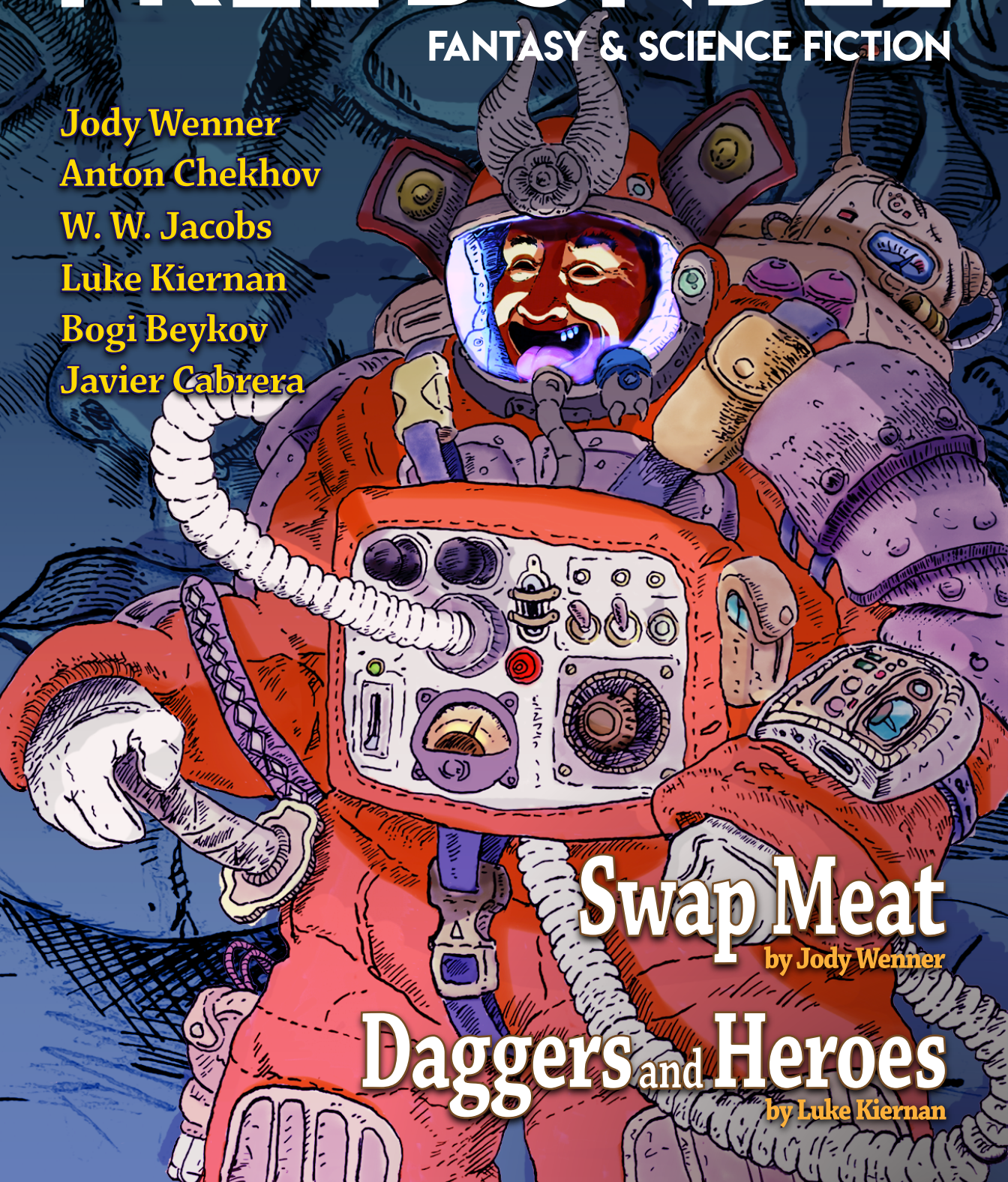
Cabrera Brothers

JULY 2020

FREE BUNDLE

FANTASY & SCIENCE FICTION

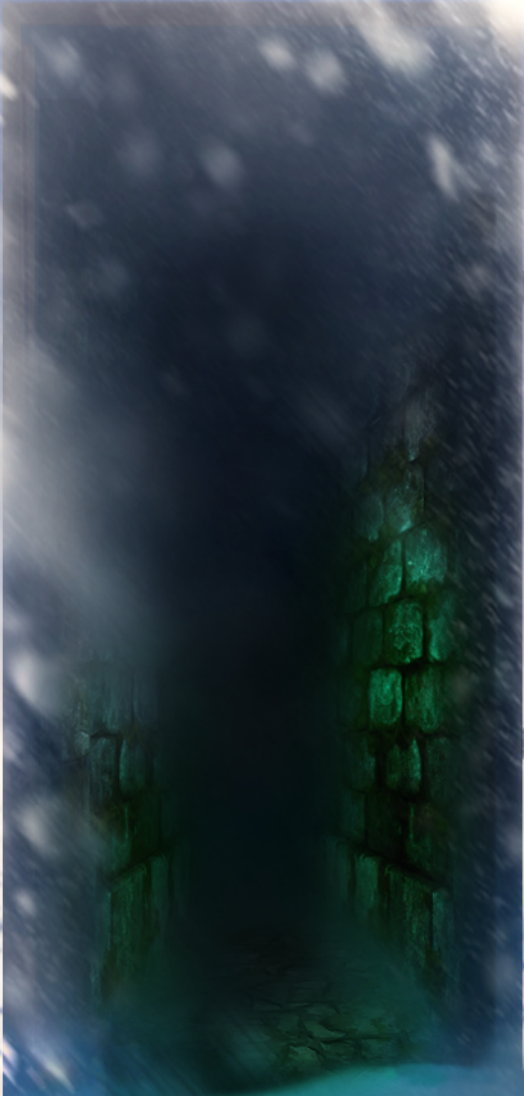
Jody Wenner
Anton Chekhov
W. W. Jacobs
Luke Kiernan
Bogi Beykov
Javier Cabrera



Swap Meat
by Jody Wenner

Daggers and Heroes
by Luke Kiernan

Get ready, you go next.



THROUGH
THE GATES OF
MADNESS

Cabrera Brothers

FREE BUNDLE ORIGINALS

Fiction podcasts done right.

WILL YOU ANSWER SIR BAKER'S CALL TO ADVENTURE?

Join our exclusive newsletter, the Society of Extraordinary Readers and update your reading list with unique suggestions on the adventure genre and weird fiction.

Every three months you will:

Travel to far, distant lands of imagination with the genre that gave birth to Tarzan of the Apes, Zorro, Kull, Captain Nemo, Solomon Kane, Conan, Doc Savage and others!

Discover the fantastic works of masters such as H. P. Lovecraft, Robert E. Howard, Clark Ashton Smith, and many, many more!

YES!

Subscribe to the Free Bundle and accept Sir Baker's invitation and join the Society of Extraordinary Readers...

TODAY!



Dear friend,

It is my happy privilege and pleasant duty to extend you an invitation to the Society of Extraordinary Readers.

As the literary world descends into a new age of darkness, it falls upon our beloved Society and its members to maintain the adventure genre alive.

There is a great danger hovering above us. I do not dare to write about it here, as I am afraid it would put your life under unnecessary risks, but it is of the utmost urgency that you come here at once. We must meet.

Instructions to reach our secret headquarters in Darrington Manor are enclosed with this letter. Our staff has already been informed of your arrival and will be at your disposal.

Hoping to see you soon,

Sir Nathaniel Baker

DOG

DRAW ME UGLY,
AND I'LL HAVE
TO GET UGLY



WIN A DOG MINI-BUST!

A MINI-BUST? YES! A MINI-BUST!

With every new issue of the Free Bundle, we like to give something extra to our readers. This time we asked Dog to give us a hand. Because it was for you, he said yes and spent a full day in our offices helping our sculptors with a very unique surprise: a mini-bust!

Here's the deal

What you have to do is simple: using our webcomic as a guide, take your favorite pencils, pens or digital tablet and draw your own Doggeron "Dog" Kenan. Send your version to our mailroom. Every issue, the artist with the most creative, original, and cool piece will win these fine...

FANTASTIC PRIZES!

Grand Prize (1)

One lucky dog will win an original Doggeron DOG Kenan cold-cast porcelain bust from our upcoming video game codenamed "CYPHER 2" signed by no other than the Cabrera Brothers. Dog himself modeled for this mini-bust!

First Prize (10)

Ten almost-lucky dogs will get an original Doggeron DOG Kenan art piece from DOG's current comic run, signed (of course) by the Cabrera Brothers.

Cabrera Brothers

FREE BUNDLE

NEWSLETTER MAGAZINE

Editor: Javier Cabrera

Art: Carlos Cabrera, Javier Cabrera

#THEFREEBUNDLE

<https://www.thefreebundle.com>

Cabrera Brothers

Copyright © 2020 Cabrera Brothers Publishing
Published by The Free Bundle Magazine

The following content is copyright © 2020 by its respective authors: Akawa's Secret, by Bogi Beykov; The Monkey Paw, by W. W. Jacobs is in the public domain; The Rite, by Javier Cabrera; Swap Meat, by Jody Wenner; Daggers and Heroes, by Luke Kiernan; Fungy from Yuggoth, by H. P. Lovecraft is in the public domain. Some authors requested to have their biography displayed.

All the other content not otherwise referenced here is copyright © 2020 Free Bundle Magazine. This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales is entirely coincidental. The publisher does not have any control and does not assume any responsibility for authors and their content. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means without the prior permission of the publisher, nor be otherwise circulated in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published.

THE LINEUP

ISSUE 1, VOL 1 - JULY 2020

The Comeback of Pulp Magazines	5
By The Editor	
The Monkey's Paw	6
By W. W. Jacobs	
Nostalgia	12
By H. P. Lovecraft	
Akawa's Secret	13
By Bogi Beykov	
The Rite	20
By Javier Cabrera	
Daggers and Heroes	29
By Luke Kiernan	
Swap Meat	35
By Jody Wenner	
DOG	40
By Cabrera Brothers	
The Shoemaker and the Devil	41
By Anton Chekhov	
For Pete's Sake!	47
By Javier Cabrera	

The Comeback of Pulp Magazines

What you are holding in your hands, dear friend, is nothing short of a miracle. This might look like a magazine at first glance, but I assure you, it is a time-traveling device. We are setting back the clock to zero, and for a good reason!

This magazine, which we have, once again, called the first issue of the first year in the Free Bundle Magazine's life, marks the beginning of a whole new ball game for us. We are in the big leagues now. From this very moment on, you will find us on Amazon. That means we are officially anywhere you can possibly download and install the Kindle Reader app. That's big. Hey, that's huge. Real huge. Freighthopping on Mr. Bezos's train certainly opens a few doors for us, and it certainly helps those new upcoming authors eager to develop an audience a new place to call home.

You can, of course, keep reading the magazine right from our web site. That won't change. Do I need to advise you to think twice if, by any chance, you are even thinking about missing the featured articles from our newsletter? On the last issue alone, we interviewed Mr. David Hayter (*Watchmen*, *X-Men*, *Warrior Nun*, *Metal Gear Solid*). We had a fascinating conversation about movies and screenwriting with him. He also shared some tips and pointers on what to do if we get lucky enough to cross paths with a Hollywood producer. That's information you won't find anywhere else, I promise you that.

Need more reasons to subscribe to the newsletter magazine? Here are two more: by subscribing, you will get a notification when a new issue gets published, and, on top of that, we are introducing the Free Bundle Originals, our own in-house podcast drama show. Enough? For now.

All this, thanks to your continuous support. We don't ask for money, the Free Bundle is, and will always be, absolutely free. We only ask for you to pass the word around and help us get these authors more readers.

We have so many surprises in store this year that we can't hardly wait to show you what's coming. As always, it is a pleasure to have you around.



Javier Cabrera
Editor

*A visitor from India brings a cursed object
that will make a regret of any wish in...*

The **MONKEY'S PAW**

By W. W. Jacobs

Without, the night was cold and wet, but in the small parlour of Laburnam Villa the blinds were drawn and the fire burned brightly. Father and son were at chess, the former, who possessed ideas about the game involving radical changes, putting his king into such sharp and unnecessary perils that it even provoked comment from the white-haired old lady knitting placidly by the fire [...]



"Hark at the wind," said Mr. White, who, having seen a fatal mistake after it was too late, was amiably desirous of preventing his son from seeing it.

"I'm listening," said the latter, grimly surveying the board as he stretched out his hand. "Check."

"I should hardly think that he'd come to-night," said his father, with his hand poised over the board.

"Mate," replied the son.

"That's the worst of living so far out," bawled Mr. White, with sudden and unlooked-for violence; "of all the beastly, slushy, out-of-the-way places to live in, this is the worst. Pathway's a bog, and the road's a torrent. I don't know what people are thinking about. I suppose because only two houses on the road are let, they think it doesn't matter."

"Never mind, dear," said his wife soothingly; "perhaps you'll win the next one."

Mr. White looked up sharply, just in time to intercept a knowing glance between mother and son. The words died away on his lips, and he hid a guilty grin in his thin grey beard.

"There he is," said Herbert White, as the gate banged to loudly and heavy footsteps came toward the door.

The old man rose with hospitable haste, and opening the door, was heard condoling with the new arrival. The new arrival also consoled with himself, so that Mrs. White said, "Tut, tut!" and coughed gently as her husband entered the room, followed by a tall burly man, beady of eye and rubicund of visage.

"Sergeant-Major Morris," he said, introducing him.

The sergeant-major shook hands, and taking the proffered seat by the fire, watched contentedly while his host got out whisky and tumblers and stood a small copper kettle on the fire.

At the third glass his eyes got brighter, and he began to talk, the little family circle regarding with eager interest this visitor from distant parts, as he squared his broad shoulders in the chair and spoke of strange scenes and doughty

deeds; of wars and plagues and strange peoples.

"Twenty-one years of it," said Mr. White, nodding at his wife and son. "When he went away he was a slip of a youth in the warehouse. Now look at him."

"He don't look to have taken much harm," said Mrs. White, politely.

"I'd like to go to India myself," said the old man, "just to look round a bit, you know."

"Better where you are," said the sergeant-major, shaking his head. He put down the empty glass, and sighing softly, shook it again.

"I should like to see those old temples and fakirs and jugglers," said the old man. "What was that you started telling me the other day about a monkey's paw or something, Morris?"

"Nothing," said the soldier hastily. "Leastways, nothing worth hearing."

"Monkey's paw?" said Mrs. White curiously.

"Well, it's just a bit of what you might call magic, perhaps," said the sergeant-major off-handedly.

His three listeners leaned forward eagerly. The visitor absentmindedly put his empty glass to his lips and then set it down again. His host filled it for him.

"To look at," said the sergeant-major, fumbling in his pocket, "it's just an ordinary little paw, dried to a mummy."

He took something out of his pocket and proffered it. Mrs. White drew back with a grimace, but her son, taking it, examined it curiously.

"And what is there special about it?" inquired Mr. White, as he took it from his son and, having examined it, placed it upon the table.

"It had a spell put on it by an old fakir," said the sergeant-major, "a very holy man. He wanted to show that fate ruled people's lives, and that those who interfered with it did so to their sorrow. He put a spell on it so that three separate men could each have three wishes from it."

His manner was so impressive that his hearers were conscious that their light laughter jarred somewhat.

"Well, why don't you have three, sir?" said

THE MONKEY'S PAW

Herbert White cleverly.

The soldier regarded him in the way that middle age is wont to regard presumptuous youth. "I have," he said quietly, and his blotchy face whitened.

"And did you really have the three wishes granted?" asked Mrs. White.

"I did," said the sergeant-major, and his glass tapped against his strong teeth.

"And has anybody else wished?" inquired the old lady.

"The first man had his three wishes, yes," was the reply. "I don't know what the first two were, but the third was for death. That's how I got the paw."

His tones were so grave that a hush fell upon the group.

"If you've had your three wishes, it's no good to you now, then, Morris," said the old man at last. "What do you keep it for?"

The soldier shook his head. "Fancy, I suppose," he said slowly.

"If you could have another three wishes," said the old man, eyeing him keenly, "would you have them?"

"I don't know," said the other. "I don't know."

He took the paw, and dangling it between his front finger and thumb, suddenly threw it upon the fire. White, with a slight cry, stooped down and snatched it off.

"Better let it burn," said the soldier solemnly.

"If you don't want it, Morris," said the old man, "give it to me."

"I won't," said his friend doggedly. "I threw it on the fire. If you keep it, don't blame me for what happens. Pitch it on the fire again, like a sensible man."

The other shook his head and examined his new possession closely. "How do you do it?" he inquired.

"Hold it up in your right hand and wish aloud," said the sergeant-major, "but I warn you of the consequences."

"Sounds like the Arabian Nights," said Mrs White, as she rose and began to set the supper. "Don't you think you might wish for four pairs

of hands for me?"

Her husband drew the talisman from his pocket and then all three burst into laughter as the sergeant-major, with a look of alarm on his face, caught him by the arm.

"If you must wish," he said gruffly, "wish for something sensible."

Mr. White dropped it back into his pocket, and placing chairs, motioned his friend to the table. In the business of supper the talisman was partly forgotten, and afterward the three sat listening in an enthralled fashion to a second instalment of the soldier's adventures in India.

"If the tale about the monkey paw is not more truthful than those he has been telling us," said Herbert, as the door closed behind their guest, just in time for him to catch the last train, "we shan't make much out of it."

"Did you give him anything for it, father?" inquired Mrs. White, regarding her husband closely.

"A trifle," said he, colouring slightly. "He didn't want it, but I made him take it. And he pressed me again to throw it away."

"Likely," said Herbert, with pretended horror. "Why, we're going to be rich, and famous, and happy. Wish to be an emperor, father, to begin with; then you can't be henpecked."

He darted round the table, pursued by the maligned Mrs. White armed with an antimacassar.

Mr. White took the paw from his pocket and eyed it dubiously. "I don't know what to wish for, and that's a fact," he said slowly. "It seems to me I've got all I want."

"If you only cleared the house, you'd be quite happy, wouldn't you?" said Herbert, with his hand on his shoulder. "Well, wish for two hundred pounds, then; that'll just do it."

His father, smiling shamefacedly at his own credulity, held up the talisman, as his son, with a solemn face somewhat marred by a wink at his mother, sat down at the piano and struck a few impressive chords.

"I wish for two hundred pounds," said the old man distinctly.

A fine crash from the piano greeted the words, interrupted by a shuddering cry from the old man. His wife and son ran toward him.

"It moved, he cried, with a glance of disgust at the object as it lay on the floor. "As I wished it twisted in my hands like a snake."

"Well, I don't see the money," said his son, as he picked it up and placed it on the table, "and I bet I never shall."

"It must have been your fancy, father," said his wife, regarding him anxiously.

He shook his head. "Never mind, though; there's no harm done, but it gave me a shock all the same."

They sat down by the fire again while the two men finished their pipes. Outside, the wind was higher than ever, and the old man started nervously at the sound of a door banging upstairs. A silence unusual and depressing settled upon all three, which lasted until the old couple rose to retire for the night.

"I expect you'll find the cash tied up in a big bag in the middle of your bed," said Herbert, as he bade them good-night, "and something horrible squatting up on top of the wardrobe watching you as you pocket your ill-gotten gains."

He sat alone in the darkness, gazing at the dying fire, and seeing faces in it. The last face was so horrible and so simian that he gazed at it in amazement. It got so vivid that, with a little uneasy laugh, he felt on the table for a glass containing a little water to throw over it. His hand grasped the monkey's paw, and with a little shiver he wiped his hand on his coat and went up to bed.

IN the brightness of the wintry sun next morning as it streamed over the breakfast table Herbert laughed at his fears. There was an air of prosaic wholesomeness about the room which it had lacked on the previous night, and the dirty, shrivelled little paw was pitched on the sideboard with a carelessness which betokened no great belief in its virtues.

"I suppose all old soldiers are the same," said

Mrs White. "The idea of our listening to such nonsense! How could wishes be granted in these days? And if they could, how could two hundred pounds hurt you, father?"

"Might drop on his head from the sky," said the frivolous Herbert.

"Morris said the things happened so naturally," said his father, "that you might if you so wished attribute it to coincidence."

"Well, don't break into the money before I come back," said Herbert, as he rose from the table. "I'm afraid it'll turn you into a mean, avaricious man, and we shall have to disown you."

His mother laughed, and following him to the door, watched him down the road, and returning to the breakfast table, was very happy at the expense of her husband's credulity. All of which did not prevent her from scurrying to the door at the postman's knock, nor prevent her from referring somewhat shortly to retired sergeant-majors of bibulous habits when she found that the post brought a tailor's bill.

"Herbert will have some more of his funny remarks, I expect, when he comes home," she said, as they sat at dinner.

"I dare say," said Mr. White, pouring himself out some beer; "but for all that, the thing moved in my hand; that I'll swear to."

"You thought it did," said the old lady soothingly.

"I say it did," replied the other. "There was no thought about it; I had just—What's the matter?"

His wife made no reply. She was watching the mysterious movements of a man outside, who, peering in an undecided fashion at the house, appeared to be trying to make up his mind to enter. In mental connection with the two hundred pounds, she noticed that the stranger was well dressed and wore a silk hat of glossy newness. Three times he paused at the gate, and then walked on again. The fourth time he stood with his hand upon it, and then with sudden resolution flung it open and walked up the path. Mrs. White at the same moment placed her hands behind her, and hurriedly unfastening the

THE MONKEY'S PAW

strings of her apron, put that useful article of apparel beneath the cushion of her chair.

She brought the stranger, who seemed ill at ease, into the room. He gazed at her furtively, and listened in a preoccupied fashion as the old lady apologized for the appearance of the room, and her husband's coat, a garment which he usually reserved for the garden. She then waited as patiently as her sex would permit, for him to broach his business, but he was at first strangely silent.

"I—was asked to call," he said at last, and stooped and picked a piece of cotton from his trousers. "I come from Maw and Meggins."

The old lady started. "Is anything the matter?" she asked breathlessly. "Has anything happened to Herbert? What is it? What is it?"

Her husband interposed. "There, there, mother," he said hastily. "Sit down, and don't jump to conclusions. You've not brought bad news, I'm sure, sir" and he eyed the other wistfully.

"I'm sorry—" began the visitor.

"Is he hurt?" demanded the mother.

The visitor bowed in assent. "Badly hurt," he said quietly, "but he is not in any pain."

"Oh, thank God!" said the old woman, clasping her hands. "Thank God for that! Thank—"

She broke off suddenly as the sinister meaning of the assurance dawned upon her and she saw the awful confirmation of her fears in the other's averted face. She caught her breath, and turning to her slower-witted husband, laid her trembling old hand upon his. There was a long silence.

"He was caught in the machinery," said the visitor at length, in a low voice.

"Caught in the machinery," repeated Mr. White, in a dazed fashion, "yes."

He sat staring blankly out at the window, and taking his wife's hand between his own, pressed it as he had been wont to do in their old court-ing days nearly forty years before.

"He was the only one left to us," he said, turning gently to the visitor. "It is hard."

The other coughed, and rising, walked slowly

to the window. "The firm wished me to convey their sincere sympathy with you in your great loss," he said, without looking round. "I beg that you will understand I am only their servant and merely obeying orders."

There was no reply; the old woman's face was white, her eyes staring, and her breath inaudible; on the husband's face was a look such as his friend the sergeant might have carried into his first action.

"I was to say that Maw and Meggins disclaim all responsibility," continued the other. "They admit no liability at all, but in consideration of your son's services they wish to present you with a certain sum as compensation."

Mr. White dropped his wife's hand, and rising to his feet, gazed with a look of horror at his visitor. His dry lips shaped the words, "How much?"

"Two hundred pounds," was the answer.

Unconscious of his wife's shriek, the old man smiled faintly, put out his hands like a sightless man, and dropped, a senseless heap, to the floor.

IN the huge new cemetery, some two miles distant, the old people buried their dead, and came back to a house steeped in shadow and silence. It was all over so quickly that at first they could hardly realize it, and remained in a state of expectation as though of something else to happen—something else which was to lighten this load, too heavy for old hearts to bear.

But the days passed, and expectation gave place to resignation—the hopeless resignation of the old, sometimes miscalled, apathy. Sometimes they hardly exchanged a word, for now they had nothing to talk about, and their days were long to weariness.

It was about a week after that that the old man, waking suddenly in the night, stretched out his hand and found himself alone. The room was in darkness, and the sound of subdued weeping came from the window. He raised himself in bed and listened.

"Come back," he said tenderly. "You will be cold."

"It is colder for my son," said the old woman, and wept afresh.

The sound of her sobs died away on his ears. The bed was warm, and his eyes heavy with sleep. He dozed fitfully, and then slept until a sudden wild cry from his wife awoke him with a start.

"The paw!" she cried wildly. "The monkey's paw!"

He started up in alarm. "Where? Where is it? What's the matter?"

She came stumbling across the room toward him. "I want it," she said quietly. "You've not destroyed it?"

"It's in the parlour, on the bracket," he replied, marvelling. "Why?"

She cried and laughed together, and bending over, kissed his cheek.

"I only just thought of it," she said hysterically. "Why didn't I think of it before? Why didn't you think of it?"

"Think of what?" he questioned.

"The other two wishes," she replied rapidly. "We've only had one."

"Was not that enough?" he demanded fiercely.

"No," she cried, triumphantly; "we'll have one more. Go down and get it quickly, and wish our boy alive again."

The man sat up in bed and flung the bedclothes from his quaking limbs. "Good God, you are mad!" he cried aghast.

"Get it," she panted; "get it quickly, and wish— Oh, my boy, my boy!"

Her husband struck a match and lit the candle. "Get back to bed," he said, unsteadily. "You don't know what you are saying."

"We had the first wish granted," said the old woman, feverishly; "why not the second?"

"A coincidence," stammered the old man.

"Go and get it and wish," cried the old woman, quivering with excitement.

The old man turned and regarded her, and his voice shook. "He has been dead ten days, and besides he—I would not tell you else, but—I could only recognize him by his clothing. If he

was too terrible for you to see then, how now?"

"Bring him back," cried the old woman, and dragged him toward the door. "Do you think I fear the child I have nursed?"

He went down in the darkness, and felt his way to the parlour, and then to the mantelpiece. The talisman was in its place, and a horrible fear that the unspoken wish might bring his mutilated son before him ere he could escape from the room seized upon him, and he caught his breath as he found that he had lost the direction of the door. His brow cold with sweat, he felt his way round the table, and groped along the wall until he found himself in the small passage with the unwholesome thing in his hand.

Even his wife's face seemed changed as he entered the room. It was white and expectant, and to his fears seemed to have an unnatural look upon it. He was afraid of her.

"Wish!" she cried, in a strong voice.

"It is foolish and wicked," he faltered.

"Wish!" repeated his wife.

He raised his hand. "I wish my son alive again."

The talisman fell to the floor, and he regarded it fearfully. Then he sank trembling into a chair as the old woman, with burning eyes, walked to the window and raised the blind.

He sat until he was chilled with the cold, glancing occasionally at the figure of the old woman peering through the window. The candle end, which had burnt below the rim of the china candlestick, was throwing pulsating shadows on the ceiling and walls, until, with a flicker larger than the rest, it expired. The old man, with an unspeakable sense of relief at the failure of the talisman, crept back to his bed, and a minute or two afterward the old woman came silently and apathetically beside him.

Neither spoke, but both lay silently listening to the ticking of the clock. A stair creaked, and a squeaky mouse scurried noisily through the wall. The darkness was oppressive, and after lying for some time screwing up his courage, the husband took the box of matches, and striking one, went downstairs for a candle.

THE MONKEY'S PAW

At the foot of the stairs the match went out, and he paused to strike another, and at the same moment a knock, so quiet and stealthy as to be scarcely audible, sounded on the front door.

The matches fell from his hand. He stood motionless, his breath suspended until the knock was repeated. Then he turned and fled swiftly back to his room, and closed the door behind him. A third knock sounded through the house.

"What's that?" cried the old woman, starting up.

"A rat," said the old man, in shaking tones—"a rat. It passed me on the stairs."

His wife sat up in bed listening. A loud knock resounded through the house.

"It's Herbert!" she screamed. "It's Herbert!"

She ran to the door, but her husband was before her, and catching her by the arm, held her tightly.

"What are you going to do?" he whispered hoarsely.

"It's my boy; it's Herbert!" she cried, struggling mechanically. "I forgot it was two miles away. What are you holding me for? Let go. I must open the door."

"For God's sake, don't let it in," cried the old man trembling.

"You're afraid of your own son," she cried, struggling. "Let me go. I'm coming, Herbert; I'm coming."

There was another knock, and another. The old woman with a sudden wrench broke free and ran from the room. Her husband followed to the landing, and called after her appealingly as she hurried downstairs. He heard the chain rattle back and the bottom bolt drawn slowly and stiffly from the socket. Then the old woman's voice, strained and panting.

"The bolt," she cried loudly. "Come down. I can't reach it."

But her husband was on his hands and knees groping wildly on the floor in search of the paw. If he could only find it before the thing outside got in. A perfect fusillade of knocks reverberated through the house, and he heard the scraping of a chair as his wife put it down in the passage

against the door. He heard the creaking of the bolt as it came slowly back, and at the same moment he found the monkey's paw, and frantically breathed his third and last wish.

The knocking ceased suddenly, although the echoes of it were still in the house. He heard the chair drawn back and the door opened. A cold wind rushed up the staircase, and a long loud wail of disappointment and misery from his wife gave him courage to run down to her side, and then to the gate beyond. The street lamp flickering opposite shone on a quiet and deserted road.

Nostalgia

By H. P. Lovecraft

Once every year, in autumn's wistful glow,
The birds fly out over an ocean waste,
Calling and chattering in a joyous haste
To reach some land their inner memories know.
Great terraced gardens where bright blossoms blow,
And lines of mangoes luscious to the taste,
And temple-groves with branches interlaced
Over cool paths—all these their vague dreams shew.

They search the sea for marks of their old shore—
For the tall city, white and turreted—
But only empty waters stretch ahead,
So that at last they turn away once more.
Yet sunken deep where alien polyps throng,
The old towers miss their lost, remembered song.



Better have an ace under the sleeve when trying to find...

AKAWA'S SECRET

By Bogi Beykov

Bogi Beykov's work has previously been published by the Aphelion Webzine, Scarlet Leaf Review and Alternate History Fiction.

Rehuo slammed his Petawatt blaster on the Chinese rosewood table triumphantly. He had been waiting for this moment for over a hundred and fifty years. Akawa, facing the muzzle, made a grimace.

"Careful, you'll scratch the table! This is the Ming dynasty. I think." Then after leaning back in his chair, he added with a slight note of curiosity, "Weren't these banned?"

"It's from the old days. And to believe I was able to smuggle it all the way here undetected!"

"I detected it, by the way," mumbled from the corner Zeno, Akawa's old but faithful android servant.

"Shut up!" roared Rehuo. The traces of emotion in the detective's voice revealed the last remaining remnants of humanity in his artificially modified body. A body he had tortuously reshaped to prolong his life, to fuel his endless pursuit, to finally complete the mission. An old reflex made him lick his trembling cold lips. He tightened his bony grip on the blaster's handle. "I know who you are, Akawa. I remember who you are."

"You must've seen my statue then! The big one, on Earth One?"

"Even better. I saw you. Inside a spaceship, orbiting around the Cygnus X-1 black hole a century and a half ago. A ship that was the only artifact, known to us to be of alien origin. Then

I saw you accelerate it, fly past my Imperial guard cruiser and run away like a little bitch! It took me a moment to find you, I admit. But I kept sniffing and digging until I put the puzzle back together and here I am now!"

Akawa didn't respond. He looked at Zeno, then back at Rehuo. Scratched his rare white beard and then, slowly tilting to one side, still intently looking into his opponent's eyes, let out a crackling fart.

Rehuo's prosthetic eyeballs squeaked crisply as he rolled his eyes in exasperation. "All of this," he continued, "This fortune, this empire. It doesn't belong to you. Now I take it away!"

"Alright, chill."

"What?!"

"Not the coldest. Just slightly chilled. A Cabernet Blanc would do. No, wait, Zeno, better bring a Pinot Noir. Sorry, detective, if I'm going to die today, let me at least enjoy a glass of wine. Have you tried my wine?"

"I can't afford it."

"Ah, then you must, man! It's something else."

Zeno strolled into the cellar to fetch a bottle. He felt very emotional and easily irritable lately. The doctor had said it was chronic processor overclocking. And constantly procrastinating his software updates didn't help either.

Meanwhile the two old men kept staring at each other while their shadows pranced around

on the bookshelves. The fireplace was another splendid display of eccentric affluence in Akawa's study. Real wood was near impossible to find these days and he was burning it for fun.

"Ah, here we go!" Akawa clapped his hands as Zeno poured the first glass. "If you have a thyroid modulator installed, you might wanna tone your metabolism down so you can enjoy this more."

Rehuro thought what the hell. He ran a quick scan for poison, nevertheless. Old habit. He tried to hide his embarrassment when realizing he couldn't recall the last time, he had consumed a liquid through his mouth. He took a few awkward gulps and looked back at his collocutor. Akawa was slowly nodding with a big grin on his face. He must have been over two hundred by now but didn't look a day over ninety. The magical lifestyle of the rich and powerful.

"You know, for the longest time I was wondering," started the detective, "what was it exactly that you had found on that ship? What resource would be so valuable that it would catapult you to where you are right now..."

"Exactly! I love that thought," interrupted Akawa, "How come this poor kid," and he pointed at a large oil painting on the wall, presumably of his younger self, "became one of the richest men in the galaxy. Founder of Akawa Industries with factories in 156 stellar systems..."

"162," corrected politely Zeno.

"Yes! 162. Which is even more than I previously said. You know, I once had so much money, I moved a couple of stars around in the Arches Cluster to form a heart? I was trying to impress this girl, I was dating at the time. I mean, that cluster was pretty crowded to begin with and her home planet was just in the right position..."

"Enough!" croaked Rehuro, "Like I said, I don't care anymore. You are a thief! You stole from everyone. And you stole from me. You got away that day and I lost my job, my crew's respect, my wife. Everything!"

"Well, hold on, you're still technically alive. With a few adjustments on your adjustments, you might even look handsome." Then leaning a little closer he added, "There are these sex clones from around Betelgeuse, man. I'm telling you..."

"I don't want anything from you, Akawa. It doesn't matter anymore."

Rehuro wasn't angry at this point. Just tired. A realization started creeping into his mind. The realization that the temporary relief, he would feel from accomplishing what he had come here to do, would be just as inconsequential as the rest of his painful existence. Just a melting snowball of unnoticed flukes.

Meanwhile Akawa was just about to get angry. He always prided himself on being good at reading people. So ever since Rehuro walked in, he recognized the look. The look of someone who had heard countless pleas of people begging for mercy. Even though no one dared to bother Akawa anymore, he, of course, still had a few means of illegal self-defense. Artifacts from an era so primitive, civilians were still allowed to harm each other. An archaic lunacy that no one remembered anymore. So Akawa wasn't worried. Just curious. Curious to find out what the detective wanted from him. How come he had gone through so much trouble to make it here, yet he didn't seem to be happy now.

"Alright," Akawa snapped his fingers and Zeno filled up the two glasses again, "I will tell you my story. And you better listen, man. Because there is no one else who knows this."

Rehuro detected something unusual. For the first time so far, Akawa was serious. The detective took another sip. "I'm listening."

"I always liked girls," Akawa began, "I know it's all relative these days, but I guess I'm old fashioned this way. There was this one called Amika. Ah. She could make a comet sweat. She made grown men turn into kids and professors into idiots. And even though I was young and stupid myself back then, I was not immune to her charm. Having a few square feet of skin per

foot less, made me look not too bad either.

We were in love and on the run. But back then space travel was much more limited. So just as I was trying to sling-shoot us past Alpha Centauri A into Wolf 1061, where I had a friend waiting for us, we got caught. Did I mention Amika was married to one of the Overlords of the Spiral Arms?"

"An Overlord?" Rehuo almost dropped his glass, "But we haven't had any overlords for almost a millennium."

"And we haven't had one like this guy ever! There is nothing more dangerous than a big man with tiny balls. When his goons transported us into their cruiser, I thought I'd spend some years improving my meditation skills from the inside of a prison cell. But I had no idea how much pain a wounded ego could inflict in the dark corners of space."

He swallowed down the painful memory with a gulp and looked out through the big window onto the megapolis beneath. From this high up the glimmering lights of the city seemed to blend smoothly into the starry night sky. The top of Akawa Tower – the tallest building on the planet. The old man sometimes joked that if someone were to jump from here, they would never fall down.

"His men made me watch while they killed her. I don't think my heart ever beat much louder after hers went quiet. Then as I was ready for my turn, I saw this bright light. I got tossed across the room. It took me a while to understand what had happened. Amika must have had an explosive device somewhere in her body that was triggered by her death. Not uncommon back in the day. It killed most of the henchmen. I helped finish the job. But since my ship was badly damaged during the pursuit, now I had to use this human coffin to escape. Some days or weeks must have passed but his men caught on to me again.

I was speeding as fast as possible but still short of reach of their rage and bloodthirst. No resource was spared. They even shot dark matter projectiles at me. At this point I was

already dangerously close to Cygnus X-1. So I thought to myself, what other choice do I have? With these monsters on my back, I preferred a quick impromptu face-to-face with singularity. I set course directly for the hole.

I don't know how long it took. I didn't care anymore. They were closing in and I hoped and prayed they would get sucked in with me and all of their hatred. Soon I couldn't see them anymore except for on my radar.

I couldn't see anything for that matter, you wouldn't believe the amount of shit circulating a spinning black hole. Like flying through a sandstorm of radioactive debris, I was headed for the eye of the hurricane. Then the screens went off and I could just feel the glow. It really looked like the light at the end of a tunnel. The ship was cracking like a cheap plastic toy in the grip of a spoiled kid.

I was deafened by the sound of the air being sucked in through the multitude of holes in the hull and some distorted explosions in the distance. I closed my eyes because they kept burning and the tears didn't sooth anymore.

You can't help some of these stupid instincts kicking in at these moments. Like taking in a last breath. As if I was able to preserve life in a tiny bubble in my lungs when everything around me was turning into dust. I wondered what would it feel like, being devoured by space itself? Anyhow. Then I woke up with this killing headache..."

"Wait, what?"

"He said he woke up with a headache," explained Zeno who looked baffled himself, apparently not having heard this story before.

"Yeah, I just woke up and my head, man..."

"Yeah, but what about the ship?" demanded Rehuo, simultaneously pointing at his empty glass and throwing a glance at Zeno.

"Well I was still on my ship. And in the ship at the same time. 'The alien ship' as you called it. Inside a hangar on board it. How that happened, I still don't know. It must have been a coincidence. It was probably just passing by at that point. Some sort of a mechanism detected

me and pulled me in. I was fine, man. Temperature, air pressure, oxygen levels, sealed against the radiation, the conditions were perfect for humans. Or something similar for that matter.”

“So, it was an accident?”

“A miracle!”

Rehuo got up and started walking around the room nervously shaking his head.

“I don’t know what happened to the bad guys or how long I was out for. But I walked around, you know? Explored a bit. There was no one else on the ship. Completely empty. But boy, was it huge!”

“I recall.”

“Almost like a flying city. Never seen anything like it. Naturally it made sense it was never discovered being, as it were, in a stable orbit in proximity to the black hole. The event horizon was so close I could smell the spaghetti. It was also somehow powered by the radiation of Cygnus allowing it to maintain a constant speed almost close to that of light. Not quite though, so it could still boost and leave. You see, it was perfectly planned from the start by whoever left it there. An inch closer or further and none of this would have been possible.

I spent a lot of time trying to wrap my head around the controls, but I’d never seen anything more bizarre. There were biometric elements, ultra-sonic energy conductors, chemical virtual reality simulators. There was also this weird organic device. It looked like a boiled egg and it would make you feel a little sleepy if you stared at it for too long.

I finally discovered a large spherical room in the center of the ship where its quantum computer was stored. Or should I say, it wasn’t stored because it simply couldn’t have been. It had a processor packed with pre-programmed quarks, except the values of their spins were irregular numbers! I only discovered the computer in theory. I reverse-rationalized its existence and later reverse-used it but I still can’t explain how because it was impossible.

Whoever abandoned this ship around Cygnus, left no signs behind either. Almost like they had

a catholic camp on board and had to erase all the evidence. It was impossible to tell how long ago they left it there either. After I escaped, I studied some of the artefacts from the ship for years to come. The scientists, working for me estimated the ship’s age at... Well it would make no sense, they were probably wrong.”

“We could have studied it. Humanity could have. The technology this race must have possessed, must have been beyond comprehension.”

“Oh, please. It wasn’t that crazy, to be honest. I mean, think about it. Humanity keeps evolving. Remember how close you were able to get when you tried to pull me in using those, what do you call them? Space lassos?”

“Close? We were 10,000 miles away!”

“That’s not bad at all! And those cords were solid. What were they made of? Did you mine the core of a collapsed neutron star to produce them?”

Rehuo grabbed the next bottle from Zeno’s hands and lifted it to his mouth with a snarl.

“All I’m saying is, it only took you 1,000 years and you almost had me, man.”

“Wait,” Rehuo nearly choked, “you mean to tell me you were on that ship for 1,000 years?!”

“If he was that close to the black hole, the time dilation must have been severe,” explained Zeno.

“To me it was only about a week before you arrived,” explained Akawa. “I wish I had more time, but once the ship detected what was happening, it reacted and...well I suddenly had control. I guess, I have to thank you for that, otherwise I would have still been stuck there. And so, you see, I couldn’t obliterate you.”

“Obliterate me?” exclaimed Rehuo.

“Yes. That was the best solution, presented to me by the quantum computer. Maybe it took into account your future revenge, were I to take a more passive approach like, say, play hide and seek, as I ended up doing.”

They both drank for a while in silence. Zeno, for a moment, felt irrelevant again. But since a moment could last long in his algorithmic core,

he decided to bring a tray of aged gouda from the kitchen, in hope of renewed purpose through outside validation.

"I must say, I am disappointed," began again Rehuo.

"Have you met my ex-wife?"

"A thousand years old and still corny."

The detective smiled ever so slightly. He was realizing how useless reasoning was with this tacky old crook. But he still anticipated the rest of this confession with curiosity. But with every next sip of the wine, Rehuo's anger was releasing its grip on him.

Akawa was now almost horizontal in his large chair probably belonging to someone equally snotty millennia ago. He couldn't help the childish pleasure pouring over his reddened face. He was a man, after all, who suckled on the attention of others his entire prolonged life.

"So, let me guess," continued Rehuo, "You take this ship apart piece by piece and build your empire on its carcass?"

"Yeah, that would have been great. Except, I kind of crashed it."

"You what?"

"Yeah, like I said I was trying to learn the controls. Then you rushed me and all that. But no, I still managed to salvage some pieces and more importantly – most of the cargo. Cheers to that!"

"Ah! Here we go!"

"Yeah, I mean listen, I was a poor man before. But imagine me now. Here I am in the far future, everyone is all futuristically rich and they don't even have weapons anymore. So, it's not like I can steal anything, man. But it worked out eventually."

"Get back to the point, will you? What did you discover about the ship? Did you save this...egg thing?"

"You've investigated me, detective, so, tell me this. How did I start my business?"

"The hotels and casinos."

"No, before that."

"The asteroid restaurants?" chipped in Zeno.

"Who asked you, boy? Why don't you go put

some more wood in the fire," and then smacking on the cheese Akawa added, "Remind me to debug you next week before you rebel completely and snap my neck."

"Wait and see until I crash right before my license renewal..." Zeno mumbled to himself as he attended to his task in the most visibly offended way possible.

"I had many different ventures over the years," Akawa returned to the topic, "some of them more profitable than others. But the money to invest in the first place – it all came from elsewhere. My biggest cash cow, my first and last business.

It still is so mindboggling to me. These aliens must have not been that different from us after all. I mean to come up with such an idea. Genius!"

He lifted his glass in a triumphant toast.

"It was the wine, man! That's right. These aliens had shipped 100 million tons of the best wine in this universe to the future. Very, very slowly aging it to perfection while orbiting around that hole. Why didn't they ever come back to get it? No idea. But it's delicious, right? Am I right? Detective?"

Rehuo, slouched back and with his mouth ajar, stared blankly into space. Akawa heard a quiet metallic snore escape through the detective's throat pipe.

"If I had to guess, I would say the alcohol negated his ventrolateral preoptic nucleus inhibitors," observed Zeno, "In other words, he got really sleepy."

"Poor thing. God knows how long he's been awake anyway."


Akawa got up from his chair and stumbled into his puffy hover-slippers.

"Throw some blanket over him, will you, Zeno?"

Gliding towards his master bedroom, the old man stopped at the door and turned around one last time.

"Oh, and if there's any wine left in his glass, bring that over to my room, please."





They were conducting an experiment, but they weren't ready for what they discovered in...

The RITE

By Javier Cabrera

Gentlemen of the board, I am well aware of the abuse I have made upon your trust by joining the late Professor Braun in his delirious experiment instead of trying to put a stop to it. I deserve nothing less than the expulsion of this house of studies, that much is clear. But, well knowing the rumors that now weigh on my person, I cannot simply afford to leave without giving my version of the events of that night.

Not as a petty attempt to preserve my good name, but so that the truth about the professor's work can endure—at least among men of science.

Have you ever wondered about the lives of the men and women who surround our University? Down there, in those fields, have any of you ever spent an evening with those farmers? Or have you done as I have, simply exchanged a quick greet, a friendly nod as we pass next to them on the way back from town?

You see, we proud ourselves of having a long tradition of producing great scholars. Here, in the midst of a hidden paradise, in this forgotten reservoir of the old world. Distinguished jurists, mathematicians, cardinals, archbishops, and philosophers, are all among our most honored alumni.

However, we know as little about the traditions of those living at the edge of this rain forest with us as we know about the reasons the group of scholars who founded this very institution had to flee England.

As some of you might know, Professor Braun was a direct descendant from one of those scholars. He, as I, suspected that the reasons to choose these lands had little to do with King Henry's blasphemous campaign against the followers of the old religion and more to do with the founders' own morbid scientific pursuits. That my friend shared that same sickly understanding of science is, in my opinion, solely the fault of the men on his family for having instilled a family tradition out of those archaic experiments.

At around four in the morning, myself and an undergraduate student met as per my friend's instructions at the gates of his family manor. Alexandra, the local girl, was already waiting to receive us there.

Jeremy is perhaps one of the most applied young engineers I have met, besides one of our students and my direct recommendation to Professor Braun. The girl simply introduced herself as the daughter of the town's innkeeper, with whom the Professor had an arrangement for help in everyday tasks, such as food and laundry. However, we later found out Braun had especially summoned her because of her knowledge of the stars. Not the same, stars we

now know and study, but the ones her ancestors worshipped countless years ago when the constellations in this part of the world were still young.

As we pushed open the enormous rusted gate to make our way across the jungle of uncut grass that surrounds the property, I must confess, I began to become uneasy. I was not aware of the disgraceful condition the professor had sunk his family state. You will understand, then, my concern when I walked into the old mansion finding most of the furniture missing, the walls and floors torn open, stripped from their wood. It was as if a bomb had exploded in the middle of the living room.

Fearing one of his many experiments had ended in a tragedy, I ran to his laboratory upstairs by leaping through the river of cables that converged up the old wooden stairs.

As it turns out, the Professor was well and sound in the large east room of the upper floor. He had his nose buried deep in five large volumes at the time I walked over to his desk. Two I recognized almost immediately, as they were zodiac charts written specifically in German shortly after WWII by one of Hitler's own confidants, supposedly copied from the journals of the Fuhrer himself. The remaining three I overheard him mention once or twice to the faculty's Librarian, but never knew they were the astrological treaties of the English Monk the Venerable Bede until I saw them on the professor's desk.

At the center of the room, the swarm of wires that I had leaped over down in the living room climbed like a vine through the walls and up the ceiling, then converged inside the mechanical leviathan Braun and Jeremy had been working on and off for the past few months, giving the impression that a giant spider and its web had taken over the interior of the old Braun mansion.

As we all know, watchmaking was among the professor's most curious hobbies. Not that there was something particularly ordinary about his love for geology, anthropology, photogra-

THE RITE

phy, electricity, history or any of the other hundreds of interests he pursued. But this machine of his, it really gives testament to the man's dedication to the extraordinary. It belongs in a museum, where other scientists can study it, learn from it, get inspired by its outstanding complexity, not hidden in some court's deposit because of what happened.

It wasn't until I touched my friend's shoulder that the books released him from their spell. "You are late, Martin!" he said. "Have you brought me what I asked you to?"

"I punched a hole in my pocket to have this last one shipped over the weekend," I said, handing him the metallic disk with the Portuguese alphabet engraved on it.

He wasted no time in getting off his chair and snapping the metallic dial inside the labyrinth of cogs along with all the others. Once he tested its rotation manually, Braun flipped a switch, stepped back and watched anxiously. The mechanism of the machine began to shriek, then tremble violently and for a moment, blow large clouds of steam, as if it were breathing in the cold air of the house with disgust.

Finally, to Braun's amusement, once the huge machine had grown accustomed to being on, the disks filled with dialects that shape its guts, began to spin in synchrony along with the one I handed him.

At my friend's request, I had commissioned some of these discs to be forged in Chaldic, Spanish, Chinese, Russian, Latin, and in every language known to man by different colleagues in linguistics from other universities. Some I had especially laid out with a combination of rare alphabets, like Sumerian with touches of Zend. Others were really curious, like a whole series with the different variations of the sacred tongue of India. He even went as far as to have me create one in a specific language spoken only in the Bactrians that few men know about. They were a work of art on their own; hand-made silver Rosetta stones loudly jerking with a clank, back and forth, spinning, dialing, each at

its own pace.

After the dials had gone through every possible combination, they automatically rotated back to their starting position and locked themselves there with the sonorous ring of an old wall clock bell embedded in the center of the machine.

Braun's eyes were of a child. "Finally," he murmured to himself.

"Now you will tell me why you needed the disks and what this thing is for?" I asked.

He looked up as far as his hunchback allowed him to and smiled, nodding.

"As you know, Martin," he began, "my loves extend far beyond astrophysics, but not as far as to include linguistics, which is crucial for the success of this enterprise. I've already informed Alexandra and Jeremy what will be attempted here today. They both agreed months ago, but since you don't belong to our department, security measures had to be taken to ensure the integrity of the experiment. Surely, you will understand."

"An experiment? Is that what this all is for?" I said, "What is it supposed to be, a new kind of telescope?"

He laughed a little. "In a way. Say, Martin, are you familiar with Graham Bell's photophone?"

"Of course; he devised a mechanism capable of transmitting sounds through a light beam. His most ambitious patent, some might say."

"And Mr. Bell would be the first one to agree with that statement," Braun said while he sat on the chair of a wooden student desk attached to one of the sides of the machine. "This machine you see here is the continuation of what Mr. Bell began at the winter of his life. I call it, the Star Whisperer."

"Sounds like you are building yourself a space rocket here, Professor."

Braun smiled broadly.

"So, what does it do?"

"It frees us!" he shouted with great anxiety in his voice. "You see, Martin, what you are looking at here is the second Star Whisperer I've built. The first one was born two years ago,

its actually buried deep inside the entrails of this newer, improved version. One might even say it is its heart!"

While checking over a series of valves and instruments on the small student desk attached to his seat, the Professor signaled Jeremy, who immediately began pulling off all of the curtains letting what was left of the moonlight bathe the vast room.

For some reason, I mistook the strange symbols Alexandra began chalking on the floor around the machine to stellar charts, so I didn't pay her much attention. While my lack of curiosity at her actions might sound strange now, I assure you that at the time it was not stranger than the colossal clockwork erected in the center of the improvised workshop.

Braun ignored her as well. "It was thanks to my breakthrough in that first, rudimentary version of the Star Whisperer that I was able to broadcast to a device, just like the one over that chair, but that was in my University office! Right through a beam of sunlight!"

"That's almost two miles away!" I stuttered.

My surprise became so evident that my friend burst into a maniacal laugh. "Two point five miles, Martin. This design, though, can handle a thousand times that distance," he said, pointing at the large plate with millions of tiny convex mirrors that tiled into a huge cone on the top of the machine.

I shook my head at the notion of such a feat. "Impossible. Surely our atmospheric conditions will degrade any sound within the photons when traveling that far?"

"Not with this new version," he said, "but that is not where my improvements on Mr. Bell's invention stop, no. This photophone you see here has the capability of broadcasting and receiving not only sounds, but images as well. All through the same sunlight beam and without the need of another device at the other end."

"Absurd!" I accused him.

He laughed again.

"Through this visor over here," he said,

patting a sort of copper periscope protruding from the student desk attached to his chair, "I'm capable of picking up images from anywhere sunlight travels to. What we have here is a window into the universe, Martin. Far more powerful than any telescope made in the last fifty years, far clearer too." I lifted an eyebrow.

"Both are subject to interference, true," he said, "but man's brain has evolved into processing images easier than it does with sounds, which is why instead of trying to make sense out of static, I decided to bring someone smarter than me."

Jeremy smiled.

"This young man devised a mechanism capable of separating the natural atmospheric noise resonating on any light beam, say, from a passing cloud, from the actual audio wavelength of the spoken word. The sound then gets represented phonetically by the letters engraved on the dials you kindly designed for us. Aimed at the right latitude, the Star Whisperer will be able to pick up conversations and images from almost any point in the universe where our sun shines."

Braun noticed my expression. "Do you understand now, Martin, why we kept it from you? This machine can win wars!"

"If what you say it does is true," I said, "then it can also create a thousand."

"Let's leave that to politicians." The professor laughed. "And since no one but us has knowledge of its existence, today, the Star Whisperer will see far beyond what Galileo could have dreamed."

As you know, Braun's contagious excitement had always been one of his greatest assets, with his students and with the rest of the faculty.

This time was no different.

I ran towards the machine and stuck my head inside its world of springs, pulleys and cogs, marveled at the perfection of its craftsmanship. Despite the countless sketches that have been published by newspapers, none captures the scientific rigorousness that Braun's majestic invention deserves. I see myself forced, then, to

THE RITE

describe his Star Whisperer, as he baptized it, as detailed as possible:

The machine was made in its entirety out of Coromandel, no doubt taken from Braun's own family furniture. Roughly twenty-five feet wide and sixteen feet tall, the invention had a similar shape to an anti-aircraft battery, but with the particularity of supporting a large funnel on its front, instead of a barrel. At the end of the funnel there was a conical-shaped mirror made out of intricate tiny cuts of tiles, mimicking the care and meticulous attention to detail one would only expect to find in the decorations of a Persian rug.

The whole construction rested on a platform made from some other kind of wood, a more common kind, with a tablet arm chair desk attached to the base on one side of the machine. On the desk, a multitude of levers, valves and measuring instruments spread out in front of the Professor as an orchestra, waiting for the director to conduct his symphony.

That said, though, the copper periscope is among the most notable of its instruments. Its long tubular shape, twisted from several points of the machine all the way to the controls on the desk, erects itself in a vertical position almost similar to the one of a cobra.

Under a bell, buried deep inside the dark puzzle of brass cogs, the silver dials I'd built could be seen from a considerable distance, as they were lit by two yellowish filament bulbs on each side of the inner walls which constantly flickered. Braun caught me staring at them.

"You must wonder why I commissioned you with those," he said, reaching for a cigarette from his apron's big front pocket.

"Sanskrit? Aramaic? Ancient Greek? Esuma, from the Ivory Coast? Just who will you be trying to contact here?" His stare went to the window. "Those living in our sun."

I can assure you, gentlemen, my surprise was as overwhelming as yours. The irony of being a linguist and finding myself with no words that could be used in the face of such outlandish affirmation left me with no other choice but to

turn around and head back to the staircase, but given the colossal undertaking of his enterprise and the many hours I had already invested in the design of the dials, I lament to say that I succumbed to my scientific curiosity. Without doubts, the worst decision I have ever made in my life.

"Professor," I warned him, "there is nothing you can say to convince me that there are people living in our sun."

"What about logic, Martin?" he demanded. "Are you going to refuse listening to logic as well?"

I simply stared at him and waited for it to be a joke. It wasn't.

"Every sacred scroll in history tells us about a singular, unique tongue spoken by men long before we cursed ourselves into nations."

I grinned at that. "You won't be talking about the story of Babel, from the book of Genesis, won't you?"

He was.

I laughed even harder than he before. "That is just a story, man! A myth! Nobody lives in the sun!"

"Wrong!" he claimed, his eyes almost leaving their sockets. "Evidence clearly tells us otherwise!"

"Evidence?" I said, "What evidence could there possibly be?"

"Our own history, Martin! Every culture worshiped the sun, and in every culture the same story appears, again and again through our time line! Nepal, Mexico, Sumer, Africa—all speak about humanity building a tower so tall that it reached out into the heavens and angered the Gods!"

"And they punished men by giving them different languages so they couldn't work together again." I laughed. "Yes, I know the story, Professor."

"Then you realize the possibility."

"Mere folklore!" I said.

"Think, man, think!"

"A widow's tale passed on in front of bonfires, nothing more."

“Nothing more? Look around us, Martin! Science has yet to tell us from where so many languages come from. How would you explain this widow’s tale, as you call it, being passed on from totally different cultures that existed hundreds of miles apart from each other, even across the seas or beyond the poles back when man wasn’t even sailing the oceans?”

As many of us had the opportunity to witness, the Professor was among the stubbornest of men when it came to standing behind one of his theories, so I decided to pass on the challenge. Not for lack of arguments, but again, out of curiosity.

“And this... monstrosity of yours,” I said, “will offer us an explication?”

He nodded. “The Mesopotamians called him Katuzakel, the Chinese named him Yu Hang, the Hebrew Jehovah, the Sumerians An, the Egyptians Ra—all existing in the heavens, all represented by one common symbol—our sun. See, when I began with these broadcasts I caught something floating...” he paused to whisper, “in the sunlight.”

He motioned me to come closer.

“At first I thought it was static, or simply clouds moving through the light beam. After all, Dr. Bell described these findings himself with a similar experiment. But then, something else came through. Something that shook the very foundations of my beliefs. No doubt Bell’s conclusions would have been the same as mine if he would have had access to our technology.”

Braun turned to one of the many audio apparatuses of the laboratory and fed it with a black wax cylinder as carefully as a mother puts her newborn into the crib.

“We can’t be careful enough, Martin, I assure you,” he said upon seeing my frown at the delicacy with which he treated the cylinder, “this here is the only existing copy. The recording process itself is highly complex. Unorthodox as well. It took me days to figure out how to sew the secrets that the sunlight whispers us into the tapestry of this wax cylinder you are about to hear.”

“Make a copy.”

“We tried!” he said while fiddling with the wooden knobs of the recording apparatus. “For some dammed reason that still eludes us, the uniqueness of these sounds refuses to imprint themselves onto any medium other than wax. I beg you to give it all your attention—I can only allow myself to play it a limited number of times, since with each play its footprint degrades irreparably.”

“Very well, I’ll listen,” I said, giving in to his demands.

At first, the recording pretty much sounded like static noise, nothing unexpected. But shortly thereafter, when thirty or so seconds had passed, I began to slightly feel uncomfortable, as if I were listening to something that was there, but my brain couldn’t process.

The roughness of the noise converged into a tempo when the Professor fiddled again with the apparatus knobs, the static became somewhat coherent, it took shape, it made sense, and from that coherence, from that pattern, a faint voice emerged.

It sounded like a chanting of some sort in what I can only assume was an ungainly form of Arabic, Mandarin and perhaps Castilian. Though it wasn’t a combination of any these languages. There were slight traces of them, yes, most definitely, but not in the way many here might be inclined to think.

The words—there was something about those words. Something in the way they were being spoken. Something that only the trained ear of a linguist would associate with a known language. It was their pronunciation; I never heard them being spoken like they were...pure.

It felt as if I was hearing some of those words, words we all use in our everyday lives in their original form, for the first time ever; untainted from accents, from our own cultural interpretation, even from our emotions—and I say our emotions because there was something I interpreted as emotion behind those words, just not the kind we might know, be used to.

They just sounded beautiful. Words sounding

as they were meant to be spoken. But it was also a terrifying thing to hear, the singing of an angel.

“This came through a sunlight beam?” I asked, astonished.

The professor nodded.

“Couldn’t this be interference of some kind? A radio transmission? Perhaps the wind?”

He shook his head. “Do you recognize what’s being spoken?”

“Some of it sounds like... Latin, or Greek, I’m not sure.”

“It is the old language, Martin. The tongue of the Gods. Adamic—the language spoken by Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden.”

“Rubbish!” I said.

“What explication would you offer, then, to this new language? It undeniably shows roots of some of the tongues we speak today—without mentioning traces from a dozen other languages that man hasn’t spoken for centuries!”

“Hundreds before I can even think on making such scandalous claims as you!” I replied.

“Dear Martin, why do you refuse to believe your own ears? This is the kind of factual proof that shatters myths and turns them into history. Stop denying your own instincts and you will come to the same conclusions I have.”

“Which is?”

“That by either the will of the Gods, or time itself, we men dismembered our mother dialect. Thus, the Spanish language was born, and the Chinese, and the Japanese, the Portuguese, the Latin and all the others and the variations we speak to this day. Mere interpretations—all sharing a common undertone, a common ancestor.”

Braun caressed his invention the same way a father would run his fingers through his son’s hairs.

“This machine is showing us that the first original language, Adamic, existed! Could you imagine, Martin? That without knowing we men have been speaking the words of God? The divine tongue—forgotten, broken into small

pieces, hidden away from us in plain sight!”

The chanting continued for a few more moments while we listened in silence. Finally, when the tape stopped, I looked over at Braun. Upon seeing me battle with the hundreds of theories clogged into my throat that refuted his, my friend turned around to mind his station and said, “Stay long enough to find out.”

As a man of science, I saw no reason not to indulge in my fascination for Braun’s possible discoveries other than my own ego, so I accepted his challenge.

“It won’t be long now,” he said, taking a quick peek at his pocket watch.

It was not. After a few minutes, sunrise begun, and so did their experiment.

Curved over his desk like a boy playing with new toys, Braun began to operate a series of handles and knobs in sequence, which made the base of the machine to turn clockwise. While Jeremy began to take long notes in his journal about it, the machine itself spun too, but counterclockwise and at a specific angle chalked by Alexandra on the wooden flooring.

Though the comparison might seem unfortunate, seeing my friend’s invention spinning around, elevating, jerking back and forth with him clinging to his chair, reminded me of Hercules taming the Cretan bull.

Soon, the night left us. When the first rays of dawn reached over the hill and touched the mansion’s roof, the professor swiftly pushed one of the dozen pedals under his desk. The machine became stuck at an odd angle; a giant sunflower, carefully positioned to receive the warm sunlight.

The clockwork began to wake inside the monstrous apparatus. I took my place next to Jeremy, where I had a good sight of the discs and take my own notes.

The moment the first beam of sunlight broke through the tall colonial windows of the mansion, the machine’s enormous mirroring dish swallowed it and made it explode into a thin line of light, no thicker than a nail, which redirected into the stomach of the mechanical

voracious beast, as fast as a gunshot.

The silver discs began to spin. First it was only one, then there were two, then a third and a fourth one joined. Soon they were all spinning around, violently, back and forth, skipping a random number of letters with each spin they took. Often, they paused and rotated back to their starting position, only to start spinning in sequence again.

"I'm seeing something!" Braun said, forcing his voice over the mechanical roars of the machine. "I can't quite make what it is just yet, but I am seeing something!"

His hands began playing the instruments on his desk like an orchestra director would play his musicians, each knob he fiddled, each switch he turned on or off, each lever he pushed or pulled accompanied by a sudden or smooth movement from the machine, which in turn, made the discs rotate faster, or stop more abruptly.

"Here it comes!" Braun announced, his eyes looking down into the periscope as the sunlight came through it and shone his face into a mask of joy. "I see something! Yes! It is...some sort of construction on the surface—on the sun! A pyramid! By God, I see a pyramid!"

A similar chanting to the one the Professor had played for me earlier began coming through the resonance box in the machine. The dials began to rotate back and forth, skipping two, six letters at a time, sometimes a whole group until they stopped on a configuration. A bell rang inside the clockwork with each word that formed.

"Speak to me, Martin!" Braun said. "What do you make of it?"

"Nothing," I replied, while trying my best to make sense of the message, "it's just gibberish."

"Read them anyway, man!"

With every moment the chanting grew louder. Soon, we found ourselves shouting to make ourselves understood. It was the same message, repeating over and over again. I was about to tell him there was nothing to form a coherent sentence with when I realized the letters had

come through in a random order, undoubtedly a product of how the machine processed the sounds into words.

Without a moment to spare I began solving the most complex anagram I've ever encountered, part Greek, part Portuguese, part Hebrew with traces of antique Castilian and a few others I had to phonetically decipher with the help of Braun's extensive library.

As I've stated during the many hours of interrogation at the police station, I do not want to, nor can I recall the words my lips spoke when I unscrambled the message, for I believe they are somehow responsible for the events that occurred next. My subconscious mind, evidently being infinitely wiser than my self-preservation instinct, keeps shielding me from them.

All I can attest, and of this I am certain without a single shred of doubt, is that the moment that came immediately after I pronounced those dammed words, the sunlight coming into the machine amplified its brightness beyond any conceivable spectrum. It was like a terrible explosion in slow motion from which one's eyes could not escape, not even by shutting them. It increase with each second that went by, it seemed as if it would never stop.

If I try long and hard enough, and make the effort to ignore the scars of pain my shattered mind has become, I see images of Alexandra approaching Braun with a knife from behind. Grabbing his hair. Fighting to keep his face clinched against the machine's periscope. Forcing him to stare at the unfathomable horrors that ride on the sunlight.

Unable to free himself from the girl's grip, my friend gave into panic. Blinded by the brightest light we have ever witnessed, Jeremy and I attempted to clumsily reach Braun when his screams turned into a screech of a senseless dialect that sounded as hollow as the howling of an owl. But it wasn't my friend's blasphemous delusions that paralyzed us in disbelief. It was what we saw when he finally managed to push his face away from the periscope.

After what we saw, it is my conviction that the

girl's actions weren't guided by a murdering madness, like some investigators are inclined to believe. It was simpler than that. She acted on instincts. Pure human instinct.

The same instinct that pushed our primitive ancestors to look for wisdom in the stars, that taught them how to hunt, how to survive, how to find their way back from the seas long before knowledge could be passed on to new generations through scrolls, or even words. It was the cumulative instinct of those that came before us that guided her hand, not madness.

That girl was the only one there whose mind and heart hadn't yet been clouded by the infinite interrogations of science. She merely accepted her people's legacy as naturally as the Professor accepted his, and as such, reacted the same way her ancestors did during their strange, hideous rites at the top of Aztec pyramids when they beheaded their sacrifices. It was the same reaction the great Egyptian Priests had at their Pharaohs' deathbeds. The same command those worshipping virgins at the brim of Hawaiian volcanoes felt compelled to fulfill when they pushed their naked bodies down into the abyss.

Instincts, gentlemen, the ultimate triumph of the subconscious over the rigidity of the conscious mind. Upon such a scene, it is humanly impossible to react any differently than she did. Had Jeremy or I been close enough to Braun, I have no doubt we would have joined her. For at the very moment Alexandra began giving the Professor death, even though Jeremy and I were both blinded by the intense sunlight exploding into the machine, we managed to see a grotesquely enlarged double iris eye cutting itself open on the flesh of my friend's forehead. The image of that eye, that nightmarish thing we witnessed and how it began taking in every inch of the room as if it were a child peeking through a keyhole, it is now forever burnt into our minds.

The only thing that stifled the madness of our terror cries was the loud jerking from the discs of Braun's infernal machine as they spun and stopped in position, ringing the bell with a

newly arrived message. The voice that resonated into the room through the wooden box did not need to be translated; it was in perfect English, and though Braun's mouth was now twisted in the macabre stiffness of death, we heard him scream for help from within a star where there shouldn't be life.



A strange door surfaces in the middle of the South Pole.

Nobody knows how it got there.
Nobody knows what's behind.

Walter Gibson, a seasoned war correspondent, will be joining a group of scientists from every nation to find out.

Grab your gear and accompany him as he walks...

THROUGH THE GATES OF MADNESS

Cabrera Brothers
FREEBUNDLE ORIGINALS

A new generation of Sword and Sorcery arrives in...

DAGGERS & HEROES



THE cold was brutal, and the wind even more so lashing at Joe violently, though he could hardly feel that as he looked beyond at the looming hill with the ruined tower atop of it. The very same hill he saw the King of the Blood Demon's itself crawl into six weeks before.

He clutched his dagger tightly as if that would do him much good if the creature stirred from its sleep. Looking down at it, it was unremarkable. But he knew better, it was a gift to his mother from the Empress herself. The same blade she used to kill a dozen Blood demons, or so the stories went.

Part of him wanted to run back to the camp, back to his brother Yon. He thought of all the thousands of things that could go wrong, what would happen to Yon if he never came back. A thirteen-year-old kid alone in this world wouldn't last long.

But he knew he had no choice, sooner or later either the cold or the hunger or hell maybe even the fighting would kill Yon. Beside's when the chance for glory was so near how he could not take it. He imagined the men cheering his name, of how the events of tonight would be retold years after he was dead just like his mother.

He would be royalty again; things would be back to the way they should've been for the past ten years. He'd be a hero; maybe General Atler would personally praise him. That's if this plan worked. He took in a deep breath and made his way to the hill with nothing but the faint moonlight to guide his way.

He and Yon had discovered the blood demon a few days after arriving in this barren dead wasteland. Luckily they saw it before it saw them. It was short, only five foot tall and gaunt, a far cry from the hulking beasts with claws longer than a man's arm and eyes that wept blood. Joe assumed it was a child until he saw the red markings all across its body, markings which distinguished it as none other than the King of the Blood Demons itself.

Joe assumed he was hallucinating until he saw Yon's face. Every night since then Joe had made his way from their camp to the hill, blade in hand and ready to kill it. And every time he ended up running back to camp. Except this time he couldn't, after tonight there would be no next time, because in a few hours the battle would start.

Joe made his way down to the base of the hill, right to the boulder he seen the creature slip through. This was the furthest he'd ever made it, like all the other times his mind was frozen with terror his feet kept on moving, with each step his heart pounded more and more until it was all he could hear.

He slipped behind the boulder and into a large gaping hole behind. He stepped into a narrow tunnel, lit only by a faint red light far away in the distance. All at once the cold vanished, replaced by soothing warmth. The stench of decay was replaced by a far sweeter scent, almost sickeningly sweet.

A cold sweat ran across his back as he slowly crept closer and closer to the bright red light. The end of the tunnel opened up into a large cavern, the walls were coated with moss, with strange runes on them. Hanging high above him where large lamps emitting the bright red light, and lying on the center was the creature himself. He'd expected something far more regal for the king of the blood demons rather than a small hovel. That only made him feel worse. Joe imagined it waiting for him perhaps, and what could he do with only a dagger?

It looked peacefully as it slept, its stomach rose and fall which each breath, which reminded Joe of Yon. He supposed that would make sense, after all, Blood Demons were once men before they changed themselves into monsters. By the sight of him, Joe couldn't imagine why, it was even more sickly then Yon, with pale skin latched onto its bones as if it had no flesh. He crept over towards it, expecting guards to emerge from the shadows. None came, that wasn't surprising Blood Demons weren't like men in that regard.

They were loyal to each other; it was their one redeeming quality. A quality which would get them all killed, Joe reckoned there was some deeper meaning to that. The creature stirred, and one of its eight eyes flickered open, and it stared at him. Joe froze, holding the dagger so tightly it hard. And then all at once all eight of its eyes did. The two of them stared at each other for what was a few moments but felt like minutes. Then it stood up letting out an unholy wail.

Instinct kicked in and Joe lunged at the creature as it tried to scramble away. He had been expecting it to fight, to transform into the terrible beast it was supposed to be. But it

was surprisingly fragile; Joe managed to plunge his blade in without much resistance. It looked up at him, surprised and confused. And then it started to choke on its own blood, glaring at him its eyes brimming with despair its hands desperately trying to stop the flow of blood. And then it lay still. It can't be this easy Joe thought expecting the creature to rise from the dead and finish him off; instead, it stayed still, dark red blood gushing out from its throat. In Joe's imaginations, this moment made him feel triumphant and proud, instead, he felt like retching. It was too easy, too easy and yet much harder than he'd expected.

He rushed out of the cavern, eager to escape the look of the dead body and the wave of guilt that washed over him. It was done now; he had killed the King of the Blood Demons. So why was he feel so sick? He ran out into the chill black night, pale light seeping into the sky. He ran until he reached the camp, where Yon was standing with a bewildered look on his face. No time to think, he could think later if he lived long enough that was.

"Joe, where the hell..."

"Oy" A sharp voice bellowed. Joe's heart sank, as he turned around to see a guard facing him. His bright blue eyes bore through him, and his face chiselled out of stone. His eyes lowered down suspiciously to the dagger in his hand. "What in the hell were you doing?" The guard snarled. Joe tried to think of some semi-plausible excuse that would get him out of trouble. When none came he settled on the truth.

"Killing the King of the Blood Demons" Joe answered flatly. The man's face twitched in anger, he opened his mouth but was cut off by the booming sound of a horn being blasted. Joe's heart sank even further, and his blood turned cold. A horn only meant one thing, the battle had started.

Battle is chaos in its purest form, that's the thing the stories never tell you. All around Joe men charging at the enemy, bullets flying everywhere, men were screaming, some in

pain, some in terror and some in delight. All the noise had become one deafening sound; if hell was real then surely this is what it sounded like.

Yon held Joe tightly and was sobbing loudly, but his cries were lost amidst the sea of carnage. And what could Joe do but try to run away, there was nothing he could do to stop a bullet, or an axe accidentally hitting him. There were no sides anymore, everyone was for themselves. Corpses were piling up all around him, men and Blood Demons were hacking each other to death.

All of the Blood Demon's seemed as weak as their king; most of them were running away. An idea of them being a real danger was gone. The battle only lasted minutes, but it might as well have gone on for hours. The noise died down, as men laid down their arms, some of them were lying exhausted or wounded.

Others still drunk on bloodlust were hacking apart corpses still screeching their vicious war cry. Most of them were picking through the bodies, picking at whatever was valuable. He was surrounded by mountains of dead, men or Blood Demon's the dead all looked the same.

"What happened?" Joe asked himself realizing that his face was covered in someone else's blood.

"We won," A man with a shaggy black beard said with a gleeful grin on his face.

"The bastards were already fighting themselves by the time we arrived" He continued.

"You" A familiar voice shouted. Joe turned to see the guard staring at him, his tidy hair was frizzy his eyes wild and his face smeared with blood. As if he's luck could get much worse.

"You said you killed their King"

"Yeah" Joe replied, his voice so low it was hardly a whisper. The man with the shaggy beard snorted.

"Nonsense," He said.

"They were fighting each other when we arrived," The guard said.

"And? Your point is"

“Blood Demon’s don’t fight each other,” The guard said walking over to one of the Blood Demon’s who was dragging himself across the ground. The guard grabbed it by the scruff of its neck.

“What the hell are you doing?” The man with the shaggy beard asked.

“Asking one of them,” The guard said pushing the blade of his knife against the creature’s throat.

“Try anything and I push this through your throat” The man threatened.

“Now then is it true, was your King killed?” Joe hoped the creature would shake his head that this whole incident would be forgotten about, everything was going his way and yet he wished it wasn’t. To his dismay, it started nodding frantically.

“Well then,” The man with the shaggy beard said placing an arm around Joe as he watched the guard slit the creature’s throat anyway.

“Atler will want to hear this story”

“Every man in this regiment owes their life to you,” Atler said while chewing his food, with his insufferable capital accent. General Atler was an obese man, long grey whiskers and a pudgy red face, nothing like the fearsome commander he’d heard of that, then again nothing seemed to be like the stories.

“It was nothing” Joe mumbled while nibbling away at the plate of rich food in front of him.

“Nonsense my boy, I was sure that all our days were numbered,” He said though Joe doubted very much that someone like him was ever in any real danger.

“Of course the Blood Demons were doomed regardless, but you put a much swifter end to them than anticipated. The Empress is most pleased, I’m sure she shall send her congratulations” Atler droned on.

“Doomed?” Joe asked.

“Yes, the higher-ups were ready to send three thousand men to crush them once we had lost”. And yet all I’ve heard for the past six weeks is how we were losing, how this was our stand. All lies.

“Why not just send more men then you wouldn’t lose”

“We were meant to lose. I fear that they saw it as an easy way to get rid of some of the lowest scum of the empire. That’s politics for you. Anywho men are men, and you still saved them” Atler said standing up taking one last gulp of wine.

“So are they all gone sir?” Joe asked not sure which answer he wanted to hear.

“More than likely, if not they be will soon,” Atler said shrugging.

“You need to get some rest; tomorrow you and I shall be on our way to the capital. I dare say you’ve quite the military career ahead of you” Atler said striding out of the tent without so much as another glance in his direction. Killing an Innocent creature to save the worst of the worst Joe thought, is that what being a hero is?

He tried telling himself of how the Blood Demon’s had slaughtered millions and put mankind on the brink of extinction. And yet those thoughts felt hollow, doing nothing to get rid of the crushing guilt. With all the other lies he’d heard about why should he believe that story too?

“What’s wrong?” Yon said still devouring his plate of food. Already he looked much healthier, his eyes were no long sunken, his cheeks less hollow. Even his hair was starting to turn back to its original sandy blonde colour after one bath.

“Nothing, just tired” Joe mumbled.

“Did you really kill five of them with just that dagger?” Yon asked in disbelief. The truth has already been lost.

“Not quite,” Joe said.

“Here you can have mine,” He said shoving his plate of food away.

Sleep didn’t come that night no matter how hard he tried. His mind was still locked in that cavern, the scene of the creature gurgling on its own blood replayed over and over again. In the short span of less than twelve hours he’d gotten everything he wanted, he went from

sleeping on the cold hard ground with nothing to eat but dry strips of beef to sleeping in a large tent and dining with General Atler himself.

He wondered whether or not his mother would be proud of what he did, then again all he knew of her was that she was an utterly ruthless warrior with a never-ending thirst for blood. Or maybe that was wrong too; perhaps she'd be disgusted with him.

"You hear that?" Yon whispered to him. Joe listened, in the distance; he could faintly hear someone walking. And then he heard someone much closer scream.

"What the hell?" Joe said pushing back the flap of the tent. About a hundred meters away he could vaguely make out a group of five or so men. Men with unusually long claws.

"Crap." They must have found out it wasn't one of their own that killed their king.

"What is it?" Yon asked.

"We gotta go," Joe said shoving his boots on. The two of them dashed out into the cold night, where the creatures stared at them. The guard was lying on the ground dead.

"Run" Joe whispered to his brother, and the pair of them ran into the darkness. Behind him, he could hear their footsteps following them. Joe didn't know whether it would've been safer to leave Yon in the tent, for all he knew they were many more of them things surrounding the camp.

It was too late for second-guessing now, so he dragged Yon as they ran, ran as hard as feet could carry him but those things seemed to be gaining momentum. Something whizzed by him hitting the ground, an arrow.

"Goddamit!" Joe roared. He was as helpless as he was during the battle. Yon was screaming at him, and all Joe could do was keep running. There was nowhere to hide, nothing to do but hope they would stop following him. Another arrow flew past them, this one barely missing Yon. Joe saw a large boulder standing about twenty feet away.

Just gotta make it there Joe thought, trying

his best not to think about what would happen after. What could he do, take on all five of them; he didn't even have his dagger. Hope that someone was coming to save them?

They hid behind the boulder, Yon clutched him tightly whimpering.

"It'll be okay," Joe said soothingly while he himself was shivering badly. He hoped to whatever god was up there that the things would pass by. They stopped running and instead started walking slowly up to the boulder, knowing full well they were behind them.

"Yon you gotta run," Joe said. He tried thinking of some other way, some way he could save both of them. They were after him after all, not Yon or anyone else, and no one was coming to save them. He shouldn't have dragged Yon here but it was too late for second thoughts now. The best he could do now was helping him escape.

"No I can't just leave you here," Yon said.

"I'll hold them off maybe you'll get away," Joe said trying his damndest to smile.

"They'll kill you!" Yon said

"Listen you're gonna be okay, just run back to the camp as fast as you can".

"Are you gonna come back?"

"Course" Joe lied holding his hand tightly.

Joe couldn't say he didn't deserve this, with the blood of an entire race on his hands. He could try deluding himself that he killed that creature for Yon, but it was for him. It was for his dreams of glory; the only person he couldn't fool was himself. Maybe Yon would learn from him that it's all nonsense, all the stories, the glory of war. The thing he learned far too late.

He should've learned from his mother that lesson. "Go!" Joe said. Yon took one last painfully look at him before reluctantly running off. Joe stood out from the boulder, facing the five of them. It was a funny thing, he would be praised as a war hero for killing someone in their sleep, and no one would remember or care about his sacrifice to save his brother, no stories would be told about

this. Maybe the real heroes are the ones no one talks about. He supposed there was a deeper meaning in that too.

He hoped that Atler would take care of him that was far from a guarantee but what more could he do?

Joe charged at them, knowing what was coming and yet running anyways. He looked down surprised to see an arrow had plunged through his chest. By the time the pain came, he was already gone.

HELP US SPREAD THE WORD!

Are you enjoying the Free Bundle? Then, by all means, give us a hand! You can help us by telling the world about us!

Or, drop us a line here:

<https://www.thefreebundle.com/>



Hello!

I recently finished going through *The Door to Saturn*, from Clark Ashton Smith, and all thanks to you mentioning his name in one of the newsletters (One of the latest *Vault of Horrors*, if my memory serves me well). Do you happen to know of any other author who can match his writing style? His short stories remind me of Lovecraft.

Thank you!

Kate Danahey,
Lockport, IL.

Dear Kate,

If you enjoyed Clark Ashton Smith, you are going to go nuts after reading Frank Belknap. He, along with C.A.S., was also part of the "Lovecraft circle." While we haven't finished reading Lovecraft

letters yet (there are quite a few of them), we can confirm his style will definitely remind you of the master of cosmic horror. We recommend you to find a short story called "Hounds of Tindalos" and give it a try. It's short but tasty. Thanks for writing!

Guys,

What you are doing with the Free Bundle is a dream come true. Thank you for helping me discover new authors! Just writing to say thanks!

Greg Sibert
Canton, OH

Dear Greg,

You are more than welcome. We enjoy every second of it. Also, there is constant a need for publications of this type. Thank you for writing!



She is in for a surprise in...

SWAP MEAT

By Jody Wenner

Jody is a self-published author of over seven mystery and psychological thriller novels. She enjoys writing in many different genres and have published a few shorts in various science fiction anthologies, as well as in mystery magazines.

WHEN Jules walked into a swap shop that afternoon, she was prepared to die; however, she didn't think she was going to be murdered.

The clinic felt no different than any other she'd been to, and Jules had been to her share of them. She'd seen doctors, counselors, therapists, psychologists, and psychiatrists. None of them were able to offer her the help

she needed, so here she was, at her final clinic. She filled out the forms on the clipboard the receptionist gave her, and then she waited. She hated waiting; it stirred up all sorts of stuff in her head. Was this the right thing for her? Should she reconsider?

No. She took a deep breath. This was what she wanted. She was sure.

Two other people sat waiting nearby. Looking at them, Jules wondered if they were going to go through with the procedure today, or if they were just here for the consult like her. The woman to her right didn't seem particularly anxious, but the man across from her was visibly sweating. She had so many questions she'd like to ask them, but she stayed quiet. Soon enough the technician would tell her everything she needed to know.

Actually, maybe knowing everything was part of the problem. She'd always been someone who fretted about the little things, which was why she had such a hard time being decisive. Funny how none of that mattered anymore. In fact, she was relieved to be leaving it all behind. This time when she took a deep breath, she felt lighter. Yes. This was the right decision.

A woman wearing khaki-colored scrubs came out of a door and called her name. Jules got up and handed her the clipboard.

"Please follow me, Miss Levinsmith."

They passed behind the door and into a long corridor.

"Are you ready?" the technician asked as Jules followed behind her.

"Wait. We're doing it now? I thought this was just the consultation."

They stopped. The technician quickly glanced at the clipboard. "Everything here looks to be in order. Did you have questions?"

Jules thought about how good she felt with her decision back in the waiting room. "No. I'm ready. Let's do it."

The technician smiled. "Great."

They started walking again. The hallway was long and narrow. The technician took high, bubbly strides. She craned her neck around as she marched and said with a wide grin, "You're doing a wonderful thing. Your family must be very proud."

"They don't know yet," Jules said.

The woman nodded and looked forward again. "So, first things first. You're going to meet your recipient."

"Oh? I didn't realize..."

"You sound hesitant. Are you having second thoughts?"

"No, I just—"

"It's standard procedure. Most people find it to be a great comfort."

Jules relaxed again. "Okay."

They walked on. When they turned a corner, a series of closed doors with numbers on them lined this corridor. The technician referenced the clipboard again, then stopped in front of door number thirteen. Jules almost asked her to keep going. Everybody knew thirteen was an unlucky number. But then it struck her as ridiculous. What did it matter anymore?

"Take as much time as you need," the technician said. "Press the buzzer on the wall when you're ready." Jules thanked her and went in. The door closed behind her with a loud, hollow clap. Jules turned to find a nearly empty room. It was long and narrow like the hall she'd just come down. Glistening white tiles lined every surface. A beam of light from the ceiling reflected off the sterile surface so brightly it nearly blinded her. She squinted and peered down at the far wall where she saw a square pane of glass centered on it. Through the fluorescent haze, she walked toward it.

As she sat down in the chair positioned in front of it, the light in the room dimmed. A soft glow rose up from behind the window and revealed an emaciated young woman slumped in a wheelchair facing her. The hair on her head was mere stubbles. IV lines protruded from her thin wrists. The silence in the sterile room was so thick, it shocked Jules when the recipient's voice came through from a speaker in the wall.

"I've been looking forward to meeting you, Jules. I apologize for my appearance. It's breast cancer, just so you know. That's always the first question donors ask, so I thought I'd get it out of the way."

"You've talked with other donors?" Jules asked.

"Yes."

"So that means those others... changed their minds?"

“Yes.”

Jules spoke confidently, as if convincing this woman was her true mission. “I’m ready,” she said.

“You don’t have to do this,” the recipient said, as if pleading.

“I want to.”

“Why?”

“I just know that this is the right thing for me.”

“Have you tried medications?”

“Yes. I’ve tried everything. Trust me.”

The recipient seemed oddly hesitant. “Sometimes,” she said, “all you need is a little time.” Jules couldn’t contain her laughter. All of the scientific and technological research, the trillions of dollars in pharmaceuticals, all revolving around fixing her and people like her, yet this woman, who couldn’t have been all that much older than her, was trying to tell her the secret was actually just giving it a little time. “No offense,” she said, trying to keep her voice even, “but I’ve had more than enough time. You have no idea. Besides, the woman outside said I met all of the requirements.”

The woman just stared at her for a long time with sunken eyes. Jules didn’t know what to say to make this complete stranger understand. There were so many things she would have liked to convey, but her mind was turning into jelly again. She had too many thoughts and emotions coursing through her. She’d gone from nervous to excited to angry all in the last five minutes. She wondered if this was why there had been others who had walked away from this woman.

“I understand exactly what you’re going through,” the woman said softly.

“I highly doubt that.”

“Let me tell you a little about myself. My name is Ami. I’ve been happily married for three years. I recently had a baby boy. My milk wasn’t producing. At first they thought it was just a blockage but the x-ray revealed a mass. It’s stage four.”

“See? This is perfect,” Jules said. “Your

husband and son need you. Why don’t I just go and tell the woman waiting outside that we’re ready?” She started to get up from her chair.

“Wait,” Ami said. “There’s more. I need you to hear this. Please sit down.”

Jules hesitantly lowered herself back into the chair.

“When I was about your age, I actually sat right where you’re sitting now.” Ami paused to suck on an oxygen mask hanging next to her from the IV stand. “My recipient was an old woman. I mean really old. Pushing eighty. I asked her why she thought I should choose her. Why did she deserve it more than someone else...someone younger? She looked genuinely surprised I would ask such a question.

“Then she told me the thing that changed my life. ‘When I was younger,’ she said, ‘I tried to jump off a cliff. We didn’t have these fancy swap shops on every street corner like they do now. No, if we wanted to meet our maker, we had to do the messy job all on our own. So I stood on the edge with my eyes closed and just as I was about to launch myself, someone grabbed my wrist and pulled me back. It was an angel. A man had seen me from the highway and stopped to save me. He didn’t realize he was going to truly save me. Long story short, I married my angel and I’ve had an amazing life.’

“The old woman went on to explain to me that the irony of it all is that you had to live long enough to see the true meaning. There isn’t a cure. It’s not that easy. You have to fight. Not everybody wins. You have to be one of the lucky ones who comes out on the other side of it. She said she believed life was a gift. It’s not perfect, but that’s what makes it so special. Pain is a measure for how good we can feel. Black is only dark if there’s white. She said now that her time was near, she was able to see the good in every little thing, even in the worst case scenarios, and as long as these clinics existed she was going to fight for every moment she could get.”

Ami inhaled oxygen from the mask again. “I started to wonder if maybe this old lady really did know some secrets I didn’t. She convinced

me to go out and to give myself a little time. I was too young to get it. Maybe somebody would grab my wrist and show me to the other side, too. And low and behold, wouldn't you know it, I started to slowly see the good sprinkled in with the bad. It wasn't night and day, but when my son was born," she took another breath, "well, there are no meds that can make you feel as good as cradling your baby in your arms. Anyway, now I get it. I assume the cancer is my penance for wanting to end it all too soon, but I don't care. Just like the old lady, now I want nothing more than to fight."

Jules sat quietly in the chair for a minute processing everything Ami had thrown at her. "Well you aren't doing a very good job of it. I came in here certain I was ready. Now I'm having second thoughts." Unexpected tears welled up in the corners of her eyes. "I just wanted to do something, just one thing, that would make my family proud of me."

"This isn't the answer. I don't care what the brochure says. I was lucky enough to have someone pass along a gift to me when I was your age. I want to do the same. Please. Go home and think about what I've said. For me to be comfortable with this, I need to know you're truly ready. I don't think you are, Jules."

"The woman with the clipboard said I was ready."

"But what do you think?" Ami asked.

"Honestly? I'm not sure about anything."

Ami nodded. "That's what I thought. Can I ask you a personal question?"

Jules wiped her eyes. "Okay."

"Have you ever been in love?"

"I've dated."

"Tell me about that."

"The last guy I was seeing dumped me because he said I was holding back."

"What were you holding back?"

"Love, I guess."

"Why were you doing that?" Ami asked.

"It don't know. Nobody understands what it's like. He thought it was my fault, that I was trying to make us fail."

"Was he right?"

"No! Of course not," Jules said with a bite.

"Were you upset by the breakup?"

"No. But not because I didn't care about him. It's because of the condition. You think I want to be miserable? You think that I can just will myself to be different? If I could, I would. I can't! I'm glad you found happiness, but that doesn't mean everyone can."

"You're right," Ami said nodding. "I'm not saying you can. Believe me. I would never insinuate that what you have isn't real. And I'm not saying love is the answer to everything. All I'm saying is...you're so young. I want you to at least get the opportunity to experience true love once in your life."

Jules was conflicted. "Maybe I'm not lovable. What if that's the real root of my problem?" It was her biggest fear, the secret she'd kept to herself. She'd been relieved to have been diagnosed with the condition just so she didn't have to face the possibility. What if she were to find her angel, but they didn't love her back? But now she faced this woman who was dying, this stranger, who wanted nothing more than to keep going for the love of her child, and yet she was willing to let Jules walk out of there so she could give her another shot at figuring herself out. Something sparked inside of her that she'd never felt before.

"I don't think that's true," Ami said. "I think maybe you just haven't found the right person yet, or maybe you just haven't come into your own yet. Maybe you just needed...this experience to put it all into perspective. Just like me. I just want to make sure that you're really sure."

A silence filled the small space again. This time it was Jules's own voice that shocked her when she spoke. "Okay," she said. "I'm going to take your advice. I'm going to try again." She got up.

Ami smiled as if it caused her pain to do so. "I'm glad. I hope you find something good out there this time just like I did."

"What about you?"

"I'll be okay."

“Thank you, Ami.”

Jules moved to the door. Next to the call button on the wall she took note again of the number thirteen on the door. She thought to herself how she’d been wrong about it being unlucky. It had been the exact opposite. This was actually the miracle she’d been seeking. It wasn’t a hoax or a quick fix. It was just some sage advice from someone who’d been through it herself, someone who was a few steps ahead of her in her life journey, someone who understood what she was going through and had come out on the other side.

Jules smiled. She was feeling clearer than she’d felt in years. For once she didn’t feel like she was underwater. She was going to leave this clinic and turn things around. If not for her, then for Ami, who was selfless enough to let her see what she’d been missing all this time.

Confidently, Jules pushed the button to call the technician back.

The moment she did, she felt a wave of heat coarse through her. The light above her got intensely bright before it flickered and the small room went dark for a moment. When the light came back on, Jules understood immediately something had changed. She looked down at herself. Her skin was sagging and pale.

Her breath was now coming in shallow increments. She felt...not herself. She turned and walked back toward the glass. Standing on the other side, staring back at her...was her.

“Jules?” the person in her body said. “What happened?”

“Ami? Is that you? I don’t know! I just pushed the button to call the attendant.”

“No. That button was to make the swap.”

“Oh, God! I didn’t realize.” She examined herself in the reflection of the window. “I’m...you now?”

“Yes,” Ami said.

Jules suddenly felt sick. Because she was sick; in fact, she was dying. She sat down in the chair. Everything in her body hurt to do so. “What have I done?”

She looked back up at Ami who was breathing

deeply from her new set of lungs. The expression on her face was not one that Jules even recognized as her own. It was one of pure bliss. “I feel so good.”

Jules watched as Ami examined her new exterior, touched her new thick head of hair. “It’s amazing,” Ami walked to the glass separating them and put her hand up to it. “My God,” she whispered. “I look terrible. I hadn’t realized how bad...”

“Please,” Jules pleaded. “Swap me back! I made a mistake. I changed my mind. I can’t do this. I don’t want to die.” She tried to calm down. She grabbed the oxygen mask and inhaled deeply.

Ami didn’t break eye contact. “I want to. I really do. It feels so good to be able to breathe again.” She began to slowly back toward the door on the opposite side of her room.

Jules yelled as loud as her new body would allow, “What about everything you said to me, about making sure your donor was ready? Oh God. Please, Ami. Swap me back!”

“I’m sorry, Jules. It’s done now and I just... I’m really sorry.” Ami turned and opened the door. She gave a quick glance back...

“Wait,” Jules said faintly, but it was too late. She was already gone.



DOG

NEOSUSHI CITY, A SICK PLACE TO DO BUSINESS.

UNDER BIG CORPORATIONS SOME PEOPLE MAKE IT... SOME PEOPLE DON'T.

DOGERON KENAN DIDN'T. FIRST A CYPPER, THEN A LUNAR MINER, NOW, MERELY A DATA-SMUGGLER.

TONIGHT A DEAL WENT WRONG.

THE LAST STRING OF HOPE...

...GOT CUT FOR DOG.

OUT OF FRIENDS, OUT OF CONTACTS...

...HE IS ALONE.

THE DATA IN HIS SYNAPSE MOD ITS WORTH ENOUGH TO KILL HIS CLIENT AND SEND RETRIEVERS AFTER HIM...

BUT, FOR WHO?

JAVIER CABRERA WRITER
CARLOS CABRERA ARTIST

HE BARELY MAKES IT BACK TO ONE OF HIS HIDEOUT APARTMENTS...

...BUT NOT WITHOUT GETTING FOLLOWED.

OPEN UP KENAN! YOUR CLIENT IS DEAD! GIVE US THE DATA OR--¡ARGHH!

CRASH!
SORRY PAL, GOTTA REPUTATION TO KEEP!

SO STAY OUT!

DESPERATE TO KEEP HIS HEAD, DOG DUSTS OFF AN OLD GRS-CODE AND ATTEMPTS TO DOWNLOAD THE DATA BY HIMSELF.

I MIGHT FRY MY BRAIN WITH THIS THING...

...BUT ITS BETTER THAN LOSING MY HEAD.

SLAMI
SLAMI
SLAMI!

OPEN UP KENAN!

THE FIRST SHOT MISSED HIM ONLY BY INCHES. THE SNIPER DIDN'T ACCOUNT FOR THE WINDOWS. THE ONES THAT FOLLOW GET STUCK IN THE WALLS. AMATEURS.

FOUND IT! GET ME A HARD COPY, QUICK!

CRASH!
BLAM!
BLAM!
BLAM!
KRAK!
GAAH! IT WASN'T DONE PRINTING!

DODGING BULLETS, DOG CRAWLS OVER A CARPET OF BROKEN GLASS FOR COVER.

SLAMI!
SLAMI!

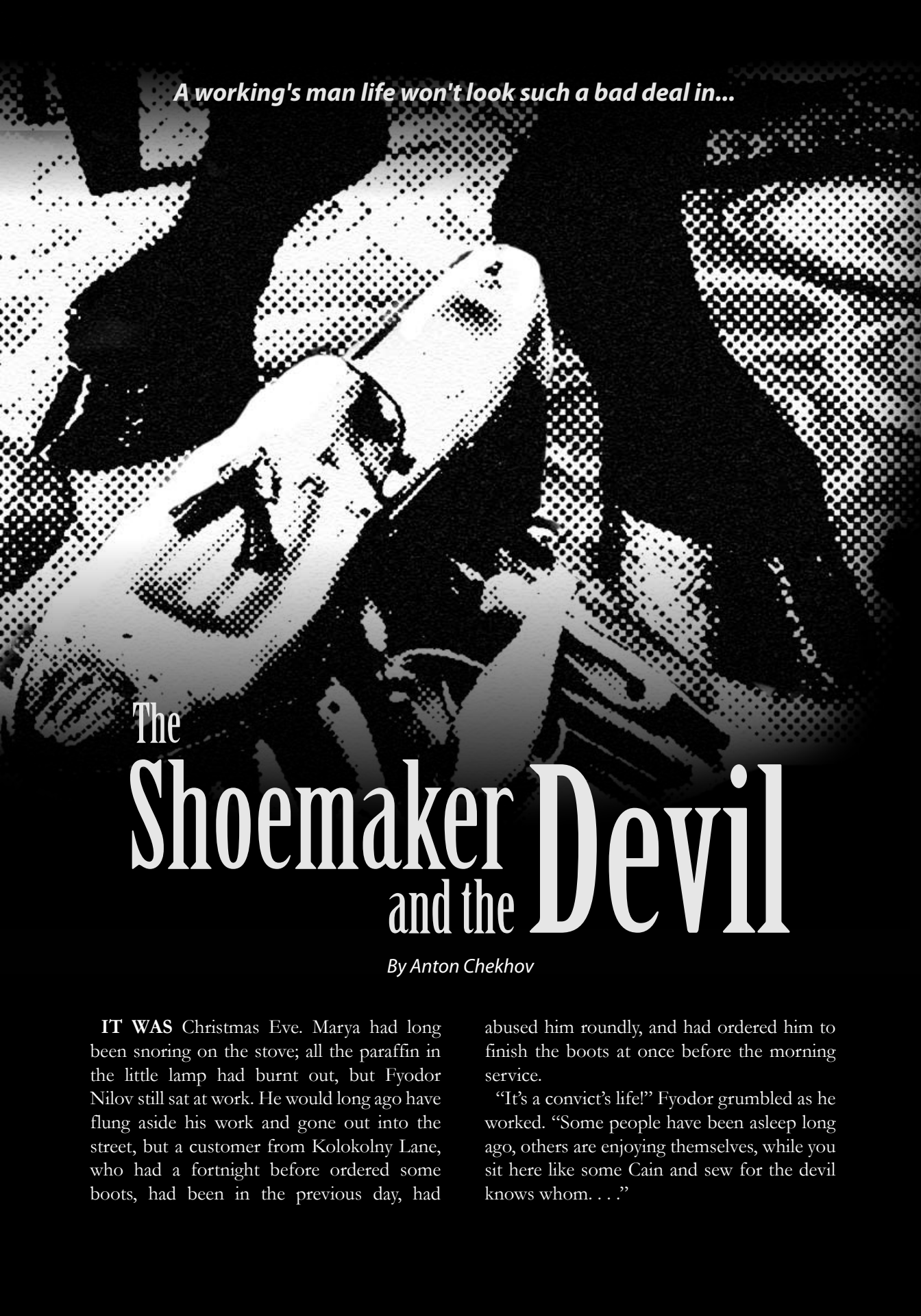
I'M GONNA GUT WHOEVER SOLD ME OUT!

THIS AIN'T RIGHT, NO ONE BUT THE CLIENT AND ME KNEW ABOUT THIS DEAL

WE'LL TAKE YOUR HEAD!

THIS DOOR IS NOT GOING TO HOLD FOREVER, SMUGGLER!

NEXT: PINNED DOWN!



A working's man life won't look such a bad deal in...

The Shoemaker and the Devil

By Anton Chekhov

IT WAS Christmas Eve. Marya had long been snoring on the stove; all the paraffin in the little lamp had burnt out, but Fyodor Nilov still sat at work. He would long ago have flung aside his work and gone out into the street, but a customer from Kolokolny Lane, who had a fortnight before ordered some boots, had been in the previous day, had

abused him roundly, and had ordered him to finish the boots at once before the morning service.

“It’s a convict’s life!” Fyodor grumbled as he worked. “Some people have been asleep long ago, others are enjoying themselves, while you sit here like some Cain and sew for the devil knows whom. . . .”

To save himself from accidentally falling asleep, he kept taking a bottle from under the table and drinking out of it, and after every pull at it he twisted his head and said aloud:

“What is the reason, kindly tell me, that customers enjoy themselves while I am forced to sit and work for them? Because they have money and I am a beggar?”

He hated all his customers, especially the one who lived in Kolokolny Lane. He was a gentleman of gloomy appearance, with long hair, a yellow face, blue spectacles, and a husky voice. He had a German name which one could not pronounce. It was impossible to tell what was his calling and what he did. When, a fortnight before, Fyodor had gone to take his measure, he, the customer, was sitting on the floor pounding something in a mortar. Before Fyodor had time to say good-morning the contents of the mortar suddenly flared up and burned with a bright red flame; there was a stink of sulphur and burnt feathers, and the room was filled with a thick pink smoke, so that Fyodor sneezed five times; and as he returned home afterwards, he thought: “Anyone who feared God would not have anything to do with things like that.”

When there was nothing left in the bottle Fyodor put the boots on the table and sank into thought. He leaned his heavy head on his fist and began thinking of his poverty, of his hard life with no glimmer of light in it. Then he thought of the rich, of their big houses and their carriages, of their hundred-rouble notes. . . . How nice it would be if the houses of these rich men – the devil flay them! – were smashed, if their horses died, if their fur coats and sable caps got shabby! How splendid it would be if the rich, little by little, changed into beggars having nothing, and he, a poor shoemaker, were to become rich, and were to lord it over some other poor shoemaker on Christmas Eve.

Dreaming like this, Fyodor suddenly thought of his work, and opened his eyes.

“Here’s a go,” he thought, looking at the boots. “The job has been finished ever so long

ago, and I go on sitting here. I must take the boots to the gentleman.”

He wrapped up the work in a red handkerchief, put on his things, and went out into the street. A fine hard snow was falling, pricking the face as though with needles. It was cold, slippery, dark, the gas-lamps burned dimly, and for some reason there was a smell of paraffin in the street, so that Fyodor coughed and cleared his throat. Rich men were driving to and fro on the road, and every rich man had a ham and a bottle of vodka in his hands. Rich young ladies peeped at Fyodor out of the carriages and sledges, put out their tongues and shouted, laughing:

“Beggar! Beggar!”

Students, officers, and merchants walked behind Fyodor, jeering at him and crying:

“Drunkard! Drunkard! Infidel cobbler! Soul of a boot-leg! Beggar!”

All this was insulting, but Fyodor held his tongue and only spat in disgust. But when Kuzma Lebyodkin from Warsaw, a master-bootmaker, met him and said: “I’ve married a rich woman and I have men working under me, while you are a beggar and have nothing to eat,” Fyodor could not refrain from running after him. He pursued him till he found himself in Kolokolny Lane. His customer lived in the fourth house from the corner on the very top floor. To reach him one had to go through a long, dark courtyard, and then to climb up a very high slippery stair-case which tottered under one’s feet. When Fyodor went in to him he was sitting on the floor pounding something in a mortar, just as he had been the fortnight before.

“Your honor, I have brought your boots,” said Fyodor sullenly.

The customer got up and began trying on the boots in silence. Desiring to help him, Fyodor went down on one knee and pulled off his old boot, but at once jumped up and staggered towards the door in horror. The customer had not a foot, but a hoof like a horse’s.

“Aha!” thought Fyodor; “here’s a go!”

THE SHOEMAKER AND THE DEVIL

The first thing should have been to cross himself, then to leave everything and run downstairs; but he immediately reflected that he was meeting a devil for the first and probably the last time, and not to take advantage of his services would be foolish. He controlled himself and determined to try his luck. Clasp- ing his hands behind him to avoid making the sign of the cross, he coughed respectfully and began:

“They say that there is nothing on earth more evil and impure than the devil, but I am of the opinion, your honor, that the devil is highly educated. He has – excuse my saying it – hoofs and a tail behind, but he has more brains than many a student.”

“I like you for what you say,” said the devil, flattered. “Thank you, shoemaker! What do you want?”

And without loss of time the shoemaker began complaining of his lot. He began by saying that from his childhood up he had envied the rich. He had always resented it that all people did not live alike in big houses and drive with good horses. Why, he asked, was he poor? How was he worse than Kuzma Lebyodkin from Warsaw, who had his own house, and whose wife wore a hat? He had the same sort of nose, the same hands, feet, head, and back, as the rich, and so why was he forced to work when others were enjoying themselves? Why was he married to Marya and not to a lady smelling of scent? He had often seen beautiful young ladies in the houses of rich customers, but they either took no notice of him whatever, or else sometimes laughed and whispered to each other: “What a red nose that shoemaker has!” It was true that Marya was a good, kind, hard-working woman, but she was not educated; her hand was heavy and hit hard, and if one had occasion to speak of politics or anything intellectual before her, she would put her spoke in and talk the most awful nonsense.

“What do you want, then?” his customer interrupted him.

“I beg you, your honor Satan Ivanitch, to be

graciously pleased to make me a rich man.”

“Certainly. Only for that you must give me up your soul! Before the cocks crow, go and sign on this paper here that you give me up your soul.”

“Your honor,” said Fyodor politely, “when you ordered a pair of boots from me I did not ask for the money in advance. One has first to carry out the order and then ask for payment.”

“Oh, very well!” the customer assented.

A bright flame suddenly flared up in the mortar, a pink thick smoke came puffing out, and there was a smell of burnt feathers and sulphur. When the smoke had subsided, Fyodor rubbed his eyes and saw that he was no longer Fyodor, no longer a shoemaker, but quite a different man, wearing a waistcoat and a watch-chain, in a new pair of trousers, and that he was sitting in an armchair at a big table. Two foot men were handing him dishes, bowing low and saying:

“Kindly eat, your honor, and may it do you good!”

What wealth! The footmen handed him a big piece of roast mutton and a dish of cucumbers, and then brought in a frying-pan a roast goose, and a little afterwards boiled pork with horse-radish cream. And how dignified, how genteel it all was! Fyodor ate, and before each dish drank a big glass of excellent vodka, like some general or some count. After the pork he was handed some boiled grain moistened with goose fat, then an omelette with bacon fat, then fried liver, and he went on eating and was delighted. What more? They served, too, a pie with onion and steamed turnip with kvass.

“How is it the gentry don’t burst with such meals?” he thought.

In conclusion they handed him a big pot of honey. After dinner the devil appeared in blue spectacles and asked with a low bow:

“Are you satisfied with your dinner, Fyodor Pantelyeitch?”

But Fyodor could not answer one word, he was so stuffed after his dinner. The feeling of repletion was unpleasant, oppressive, and to

distract his thoughts he looked at the boot on his left foot.

“For a boot like that I used not to take less than seven and a half roubles. What shoemaker made it?” he asked.

“Kuzma Lebyodkin,” answered the footman.

“Send for him, the fool!”

Kuzma Lebyodkin from Warsaw soon made his appearance. He stopped in a respectful attitude at the door and asked:

“What are your orders, your honor?”

“Hold your tongue!” cried Fyodor, and stamped his foot. “Don’t dare to argue; remember your place as a cobbler! Blockhead! You don’t know how to make boots! I’ll beat your ugly phiz to a jelly! Why have you come?”

“For money.”

“What money? Be off! Come on Saturday! Boy, give him a cuff!”

But he at once recalled what a life the customers used to lead him, too, and he felt heavy at heart, and to distract his attention he took a fat pocketbook out of his pocket and began counting his money. There was a great deal of money, but Fyodor wanted more still. The devil in the blue spectacles brought him another notebook fatter still, but he wanted even more; and the more he counted it, the more discontented he became.

In the evening the evil one brought him a full-bosomed lady in a red dress, and said that this was his new wife. He spent the whole evening kissing her and eating gingerbreads, and at night he went to bed on a soft, downy feather-bed, turned from side to side, and could not go to sleep. He felt uncanny.

“We have a great deal of money,” he said to his wife; “we must look out or thieves will be breaking in. You had better go and look with a candle.”

He did not sleep all night, and kept getting up to see if his box was all right. In the morning he had to go to church to matins. In church the same honor is done to rich and poor alike. When Fyodor was poor he used to pray in church like this: “God, forgive me, a sinner!”

He said the same thing now though he had become rich. What difference was there? And after death Fyodor rich would not be buried in gold, not in diamonds, but in the same black earth as the poorest beggar. Fyodor would burn in the same fire as cobblers. Fyodor resented all this, and, too, he felt weighed down all over by his dinner, and instead of prayer he had all sorts of thoughts in his head about his box of money, about thieves, about his bartered, ruined soul.

He came out of church in a bad temper. To drive away his unpleasant thoughts as he had often done before, he struck up a song at the top of his voice. But as soon as he began a policeman ran up and said, with his fingers to the peak of his cap:

“Your honor, gentlefolk must not sing in the street! You are not a shoemaker!”

Fyodor leaned his back against a fence and fell to thinking: what could he do to amuse himself?

“Your honor,” a porter shouted to him, “don’t lean against the fence, you will spoil your fur coat!”

Fyodor went into a shop and bought himself the very best concertina, then went out into the street playing it. Everybody pointed at him and laughed.

“And a gentleman, too,” the cabmen jeered at him; “like some cobbler. . . .”

“Is it the proper thing for gentlefolk to be disorderly in the street?” a policeman said to him. “You had better go into a tavern!”

“Your honor, give us a trifle, for Christ’s sake,” the beggars wailed, surrounding Fyodor on all sides.

In earlier days when he was a shoemaker the beggars took no notice of him, now they wouldn’t let him pass.

And at home his new wife, the lady, was waiting for him, dressed in a green blouse and a red skirt. He meant to be attentive to her, and had just lifted his arm to give her a good clout on the back, but she said angrily:

“Peasant! Ignorant lout! You don’t know how

THE SHOEMAKER AND THE DEVIL

to behave with ladies! If you love me you will kiss my hand; I don't allow you to beat me."

"This is a blasted existence!" thought Fyodor. "People do lead a life! You mustn't sing, you mustn't play the concertina, you mustn't have a lark with a lady. . . . Pfool!"

He had no sooner sat down to tea with the lady when the evil spirit in the blue spectacles appeared and said:

"Come, Fyodor Pantelyeitch, I have performed my part of the bargain. Now sign your paper and come along with me!"

And he dragged Fyodor to hell, straight to the furnace, and devils flew up from all directions and shouted:

"Fool! Blockhead! Ass!"

There was a fearful smell of paraffin in hell, enough to suffocate one. And suddenly it all vanished. Fyodor opened his eyes and saw his table, the boots, and the tin lamp. The lamp-glass was black, and from the faint light on the wick came clouds of stinking smoke as from a chimney. Near the table stood the customer in the blue spectacles, shouting angrily:

"Fool! Blockhead! Ass! I'll give you a lesson, you scoundrel! You took the order a fortnight ago and the boots aren't ready yet! Do you suppose I want to come trapesing round here half a dozen times a day for my boots? You wretch! you brute!"

Fyodor shook his head and set to work on the boots. The customer went on swearing and threatening him for a long time. At last when he subsided, Fyodor asked sullenly:

"And what is your occupation, sir?"

"I make Bengal lights and fireworks. I am a pyrotechnician."

They began ringing for matins. Fyodor gave the customer the boots, took the money for them, and went to church.

Carriages and sledges with bearskin rugs were dashing to and fro in the street; merchants, ladies, officers were walking along the pavement together with the humbler folk. . . . But Fyodor did not envy them nor repine at his lot. It

seemed to him now that rich and poor were equally badly off. Some were able to drive in a carriage, and others to sing songs at the top of their voice and to play the concertina, but one and the same thing, the same grave, was awaiting all alike, and there was nothing in life for which one would give the devil even a tiny scrap of one's soul.

the first
time is
the best
one.

We know you don't have twenty short stories published in every Sci-Fi Magazine.

Maybe you haven't even been published yet. That's fine. We don't care.

If this is your first time publishing, so be it. We want to read your stories.

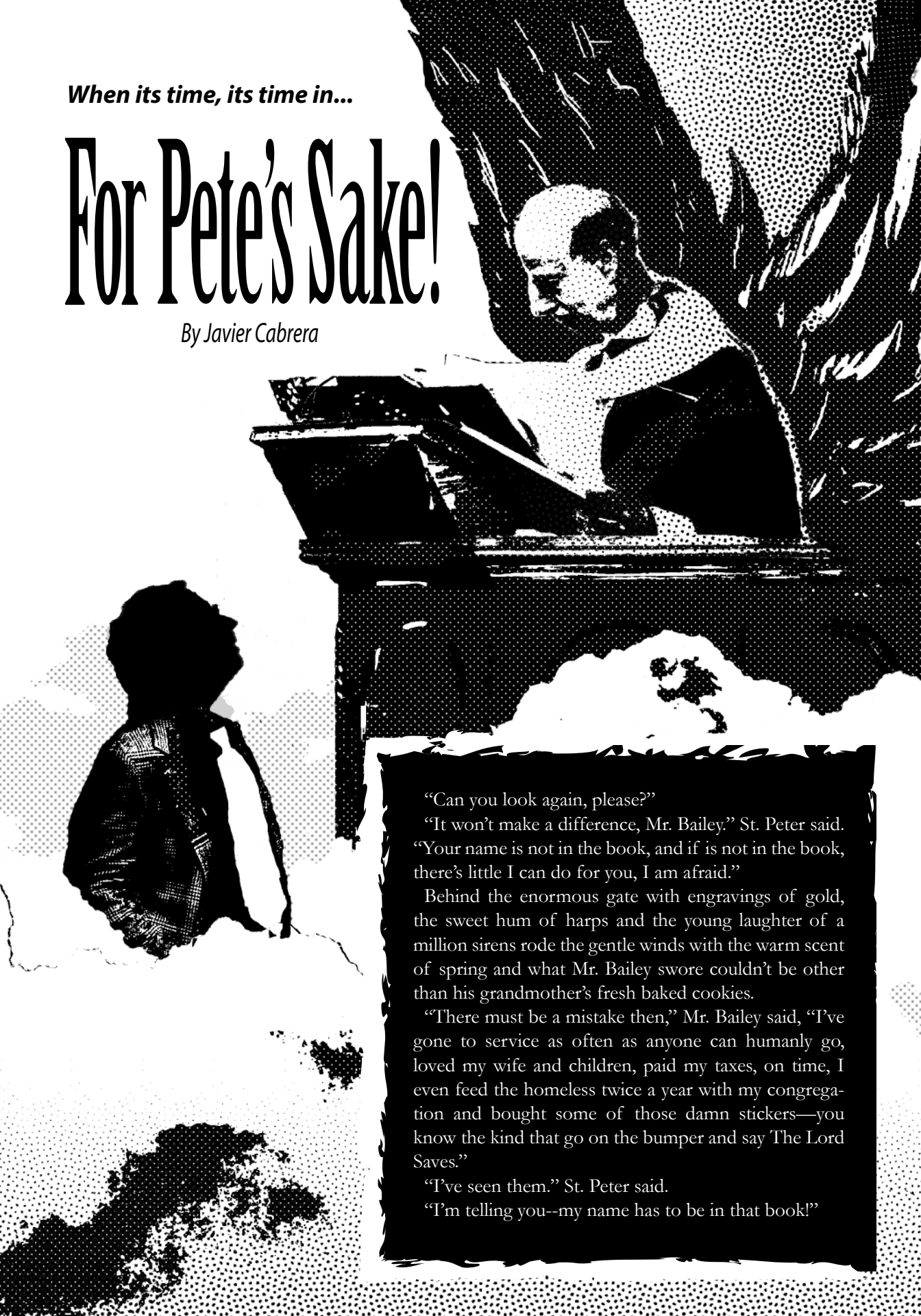
Free Bundle.
Fantasy & Sci-Fi Magazine.

Cabrera Brothers
FREE BUNDLE
NEWSLETTER MAGAZINE

When its time, its time in...

For Pete's Sake!

By Javier Cabrera



"Can you look again, please?"

"It won't make a difference, Mr. Bailey," St. Peter said. "Your name is not in the book, and if it is not in the book, there's little I can do for you, I am afraid."

Behind the enormous gate with engravings of gold, the sweet hum of harps and the young laughter of a million sirens rode the gentle winds with the warm scent of spring and what Mr. Bailey swore couldn't be other than his grandmother's fresh baked cookies.

"There must be a mistake then," Mr. Bailey said, "I've gone to service as often as anyone can humanly go, loved my wife and children, paid my taxes, on time, I even feed the homeless twice a year with my congregation and bought some of those damn stickers—you know the kind that go on the bumper and say The Lord Saves."

"I've seen them," St. Peter said.

"I'm telling you--my name has to be in that book!"

St. Peter sighed. "I already told you, Mr. Bailey; your name is not here."

Someone approached the big wooden lectern from behind Mr. Bailey. "Would you please step aside?" A woman wearing a bath robe and a cord around her neck asked.

Mr. Bailey moved. "Oh, I'm sorry, please--I was just making an inquiry."

"Sarah Collins, from Bellevue." The woman said, not paying him the slightest attention.

St. Peter nodded and went through the pages of the big golden book after damping his fat thumb on the small wet pad that rested next to it.

"Sarah Collins... Bellevue... Sarah Collins..." St. Peter murmured.

The woman leaned forward. "Bellevue, Washington."

"Oh, yes, here you are. Sarah Collins, Bellevue, Washington. Very well... drowned by the husband, I see, hmmm?"

"I expect him to rot in hell because of it," the woman said.

"The bare least, ma'am, the bare least," Mr. Bailey said. The woman gave him a shoulder.

"He will be judged." St. Peter assured her, "The lord will measure his sins with the same rule he measured yours, no doubt about that. Do not trouble yourself with it. Right now all you have to worry about is cleaning yourself up and getting your wings."

The woman's face lit. "My wings?"

"It will all be covered in Orientation. This way please, just follow the gold line on the floor."

"Like the Wizard of Oz?"

"Yes, dear," St. Peter said, smiling, "just like in the Wizard of Oz. Welcome to Heaven."

"Oh, how marvelous!" The woman said and walked up the hill dragging an electric shaver from her neck as the gates opened.

"Would you please be so kind and take another look?" Mr. Bailey insisted.

"Mr. Bailey..." St. Peter sighed. "All right, if that is what you want, I will take another look."

"Thank you."

"Well, let's see—oh, excuse me for a moment," St. Peter said as another person approached his lectern.

"Yes, yes, of course." Mr. Bailey stepped aside letting a man with a very stiff walk take his place in front of St. Peter.

"Name please?"

"Richard Spalding, Sir," the man said, timidly leaning forward.

"Place of birth?"

"Iowa, Sir."

"Oh yes, here you are. Richard Spal—"

St. Peter stopped cold, then stared at the man from above his glasses.

"Something wrong?" The man asked.

"Could you hold on a second please?" St. Peter said and picked up the receiver of a red phone under the lectern as he dialed a number.

As the phone rang on the other side of the line, the man grew nervous.

"Is there a problem?" He asked. St. Peter held a finger to him. Mr. Bailey shrugged.

"Hello, Chief?" St. Peter said, clearing his throat away from the receiver, "Yes, St. Peter. I apologize, but we have a Richard Spalding here? From Iowa? Yes. No no, he just arrived. Well, that's why I'm calling, the way he died... yes, no I understand. Of course. Very well. Thank you, Sir, it will be taken care of. Thank you. Bye."

After hanging the receiver St. Peter didn't speak right away. Instead, he stood behind the giant dark wood lectern, staring down at the man the way a judge would. The man was as uncomfortable as Mr. Bailey about it.

"Yes?" the man finally said, nearly at volume.

St. Peter didn't answer him.

"Can I go inside now?"

"Sure," St. Peter said, throwing a pen across his lectern in a bad way, "but first you have to drop your pants, son."

"I beg your pardon?" the man said. Mr. Bailey couldn't get out of his astonishment either.

"You heard me," St. Peter said, "take them off, or I'll have one of the Archangels do it for you and trust me, you're not going to like it."

The man stood for a moment with a puzzled look, then realized the slight grin on St. Peter's face and gave in; he unbuttoned his belt and slowly proceed to drop his pants. Mr. Bailey let out a little scream when he saw the snake coming out of the man. It was still alive and trying to get out, but the man pressed his cheeks hard enough to keep it a guest.

"You thought we wouldn't find out, didn't you?" St. Peter said, shaking his head. "We have you on file, son."

"I wasn't aware it was a crime," the man defended himself. "Please, you must let me in, I'm a good person!"

"How can you say that, huh? How can you say that standing right there with a snake the way you are?" St. Peter went red from the collar up. "We have a place for people like you, Mr. Spalding. Deviants go straight to hell!" and as he said it, and pulled a lever on his lectern, the clouds below the man gave in. A dark void underneath swallowed him in an instant and if Mr. Bailey hadn't been as close to the gates as he was, he would have fallen right down along with him too.

The man's screams echoed from below, past the clouds, as Mr. Bailey took his place in front of the lectern again.

"Some people, uh?" he said, but St. Peter didn't find his remark worthy of agreeing at all. Instead, he went through the pages of his big golden book again, trying to find his name on it.

Each page St. Peter turned without finding him was a cut deep into his hope. For every minute the big bearded man spent going through a page, Mr. Baily bled two. It became so silent that the only sounds came from the happy echoes of the angels at the other side of the gate and St. Peter's heavy breathing as he turned the stiff ivory pages.

Mr. Baily couldn't take the awkwardness of the moment any longer.

"Maybe I'm under Micky." He said, "People always called me Micky, you know."

"Micky? But that's not your name, that's a

nickname."

"Well yes, but perhaps the person who wrote the book made a mistake and put me under Micky."

"God wrote it," St. Peter said, and all of the sudden Mr. Bailey forgot what he was about to say.

"Perhaps there's a missing page?" He suggested instead.

St. Peter stopped turning a page mid-way.

"There are no missing pages in this book, Mr. Bailey," the big bearded man said, taking offense.

"Well, I have to be somewhere, don't I?"

"Let me check with... another department," St. Peter said, taking the big heavy red phone from under the wooden lectern and placing it on top. "It will only take a moment," he assured Mr. Baily, dialing a long distance number with his pen and waiting on the line.

"They always let it ring," he finally said, when enough time had passed, "they know I hate it when they do that, so they let it ring."

"Who's they?"

"Oh, a moment," St. Peter said, holding a finger and clearing his throat, "Yes, hell? How things are going down there?"

Mr. Bailey felt his knees go rubbery. "Hell! But I—"

St. Peter swapped the receiver to the other ear and gave him his shoulder. "Yes, I want to inquire about a soul. No, it's all right, I can hold."

"Excuse me, sir," Mr. Bailey said, "I think there has been a misunders—"

"We will see in a minute, Mr. Bailey," St. Peter said. "If you are not in this book, you must be in the other one."

"But, you don't understand, I'm a religious man, I believe in our savior, in Santa Claus, in Leprechauns—"

"Yes! I'm still here," St. Peter said on the phone, waving a hand for Mr. Bailey to keep quiet. "Aha. Yes, hi, can you—well, sure. Why not."

Mr. Bailey was confused.

St. Peter shook his head to him. "They put me on hold again. These people are very, very disorganized..."

"Well, it is hell," Mr. Bailey said.

"Yes, but still, one would think they would have made a system by now. We did! I mean... come on," he said, tapping on his wristwatch.

"Look, I don't want to take a whole lot of your time," Mr. Bailey said, "you don't have to bother them down there, I'm sure they have their plate full—"

"It is no bother Mr. Bailey, we are here to serve."

"No, yes, I understand, but I don't want to impose, you know."

St. Peter winked to be cool at him.

"And y-you are doing a remarkable job, sir, really," Mr. Bailey continued, "but, what if I just spend my eternity around that cloud over there, uh? Can we just forget the whole thing?"

"We don't have Limbo anymore, Mr. Bailey," St. Peter said, "orders from the top. Instead of wandering around, people got together in big groups and tried to break into Heaven. Nasty business."

"I understand—but that's not me, I promise you I won't try to get inside," Mr. Bailey said, his voice shattering. "Look how short I am; I can't even get up the walls."

"You are short, yes... , oh, excuse me. Yes, I'm here," St. Peter said, holding the receiver against one ear and a finger in the other. "Yes, I'm calling to see if there is a gentleman in your book. He is here and we can't find him in ours, so..."

St. Peter waited.

Mr. Bailey died a little.

"Aha." St. Peter said, "Yes. Oh, really? Very well. Mr. Michael Bailey, from Iowa. Yes. Yes, just a moment ago. Aha. Wait, are you sure?"

"What they say?" Mr. Bailey said.

St. Peter held an open hand at him.

"I see. Well, thank you very much, I appreciate the time. Good day to—" St. Peter sighed. They'd hung up on him.

Mr. Bailey's blood was pumping so hard

through his ears he could barely hear himself breathe, much less understand what St. Peter was saying. All he saw through his tunnel vision was the saint's lips moving through his thick beard, but he couldn't hear a word of it.

After realizing talking to the man was of no use, St. Peter looked down at him from his giant Lectern and made the typical baseball gesture for safe.

"T-They don't have me on their book either?"

"No, Mr. Bailey, they don't"

"Are you sure?"

"Well, if you want me to check again—"

"No! Please, that's fine, really!"

"It's no problem."

"I insist," Mr. Bailey said, "if they say I'm not in their book, then I believe them. Why would they lie? Right? S-So let's j-just go back looking me into this one, yes? I have to be here somewhere!"

"Mr. Bailey," St. Peter said, "I understand your urge to, well, get closure. I would probably be doing the same in your shoes."

"Thank you!"

"But, you have to understand, I've already looked in the book three times; your name is simply not in here."

"If I'm not in your book and I'm not in—" he waved down with his thumb, "theirs, then that must mean I'm not supposed to be here yet, right?"

St. Peter scratched his beard. "No, that's not how it works. You are quite dead, I'm afraid."

"How would you know? You can't even find a simple name on that book and that's all you're supposed to do around here!"

"Mr. Bailey, let's not get nervous, okay? I am sure your name is somewhere; just not in this book."

"Well, can't you call God and ask him?"

"I already bothered him a while ago, you saw me, I can't just—"

"But this is my eternal soul we're talking about here! I beg you!"

"You don't want him to be pissed at you, trust me; there are worse things than hell and he

knows a bunch of them.”

“Isn’t the holy father supposed to be merciful to his children?”

“Not on boxing night.”

“Well, if I’m not in your book, then in whose book I am?” Mr. Bailey said, “I mean, what are we doing here, you know what I mean?”

St. Peter nodded, patiently. “Give me a moment, please; I will call death and get this sorted out immediately.”

“Yes, please. Do that. Call death. I want to know why he killed me when my name is not in anyone’s book!” Mr. Bailey said, “I mean what kind of place are you people running here? I’ve been a devoted man my whole life and this is not what they told us. By far, this isn’t. I’m very, very disappointed in how your organization is handling things.”

“Our organization.”

“Yes, your organization.”

St. Peter sighed. “Look, I’m terribly sorry about all this. I can only imagine how stressful this can be for you.”

“Do you? Really?”

“Well, I can try to.”

“Please, don’t.” Mr. Bailey said, “One invests a great deal of time in faith; you know, Sundays, completely lost, weekends, special occasions...”

“You are correct.”

“Without mentioning the good book! I’ve read it, in case you’re wondering!”

“Have you really?” St. Peter said, smiling.

“Well, just a few hundred pages in, because you know, it’s too big. Had charity work to do.”

“Yes,” St. Peter said, “It’s quite big.”

“But I got to the important parts—and nowhere in there put that something like this could happen. Nowhere!”

“I understand your frustration, Mr. Bailey. I really do.” St. Peter said, “On behalf of the divine creation I would like to apologize for this unpleasant incident. It has never happened before, I assure you. I am completely puzzled with this one.”

“I’ve noticed!”

“Right. We will get to the bottom of this, I promise you. Oh, here comes death.”

A tall, dark figure only found in men’s nightmares walked in from behind a thick curtain of clouds. It was wearing a black robe and had no discernible face. The figure was followed by shadows that appeared to profanely dance around it, vanishing under each step it took.

“Hi, Pete,” Death said.

“Hi, pal, how are you?”

“Good. Good. Doing good, you know. Lots of work lately.”

“I bet. Kids all right?”

Death nodded. “Yep, wife too. She asked about you the other day, we had steak and her father—”

“Excuse me?” Mr. Bailey coughed. “Could I get this taken care of?”

“What’s the matter, buddy,” Death said, “you’re in a hurry or something?”

“No! No, of course not! But I’m standing right here and I would like my problem solved as soon as possible, so I can get into Heaven.”

“We don’t actually know if you belong here, Mr. Bailey, not yet at least,” St. Peter said.

“I think that was solved when you called Hell?” Mr. Bailey said.

“Yeah but—look, let me handle this, okay?” St. Peter said.

“Please, do.”

St. Peter turned to Death. “Listen, Dani...”

“Yeah?”

“Do you have by any means a Michael Bailey in your list?”

“Let me check,” Death said and in a puff of horror a list materialized on the air, floating in front of them.

“Bailey you said?”

“Yes, Bailey. Michael Bailey, from Iowa,” St. Peter said.

“And when did he die?”

St. Peter turned to Mr. Bailey. “When you died?”

“I don’t know, how long I have been here? Thirty, thirty-five minutes?”

“Yes, thirty minutes,” St. Peter said. “Less

than thirty minutes. You haven't been here that long."

"So less than thirty minutes, uh? Let me check," Death said and went through the list of darkness name by name. It must have taken it another thirty minutes, but when it was over, Death turned to St. Peter and said, "Nope, he ain't on my list."

St. Peter was baffled. "What? That cannot be!"

"I know, right?" Death said.

Mr. Bailey cut in. "What's going on here? What does he mean I'm not in death's list?"

Death shrugged. "You aren't. Double checked. Sorry. Or congratulations, depends on how you may want to see it."

"I'm... I'm really confused," Mr. Bailey said, feeling a headache coming.

"Mr. Bailey," St. Peter began, "if you are not in his list, and you are not in my book, and you are not in Hell's book, then that only means one thing."

"What?"

"That you are alive."

"But that's impossible! I am here, aren't I?"

"He's right, Pete," Death said, "He's here."

Mr. Bailey began breathing hard. "How the hell did I end up here if I'm not in anyone's list? Is that something that can happen?"

"Don't look at me," Death said, "This ain't my screw up. Do you remember how you died? Maybe we can take it from there."

Mr. Bailey thought about Death's question for a while, but as much as he wanted to, the last moments of his life were unclear to him.

"I don't," he finally said, "it's all... blurry."

"Leave it; if you can't, you can't," Death said. "Some people never do anyway. Was worth a shot."

St. Peter was stroking his beard, deep in thought as he went over the book again and again looking for Mr. Bailey's name, with nothing coming up.

After a while, Mr. Bailey felt he'd been patient enough. "So what now?"

"You have a tough one here, Pete." Death

said, "You have to call the old man."

"I already did for something else today."

"Ah, petty. It's Sunday; boxing night." Death said, "If you ask me you need to call him. I mean, this one's a real mystery here, Pete."

"Yes, I know. I was just hopping I didn't have to."

"Yeah, sorry about that," Death said, "I wasn't of much help."

"I appreciate you came here, sir," Mr. Bailey said, "I know how busy you are."

"No problem, buddy. Pete here will find you a place, don't worry. Things like this never happen, you know."

"I can imagine, yes," Mr. Bailey said.

"Thank you for coming, Dani. I won't keep you any longer," St. Peter said, patting the creature on the shoulder.

"Hell no, I'm staying. I want to see what happens."

"Oh well, here I go," St. Peter said as he dialed God's number again.

It rang only once.

"H-Hello, Sir? Yes. No Sir, no. Pardon me for bothering you on—yes of course, Sir, I will make it quick. I have a soul here which is neither in our book or in Hell's. No, Sir, I double checked. Most certainly, Sir, just a moment."

St. Peter began to look through the pages of his book very nervously again, even when it was at least the sixth time he did so and had it not been for Death's quick reflexes, he would have thrown the phone receiver to the floor.

"Quit it," Death said when it caught Mr. Bailey trying to look for a face inside the creature's robe.

"I'm sorry, it's just that I've never thought I would—" Mr. Bailey began, but death shushed him with a long, bony finger.

After a while of browsing through the big book of souls it was obvious for everyone that St. Peter wasn't getting anywhere, so the saint swallowed hard, closed the golden engraved cover and put the receiver on his ear again.

"I-I am terribly sorry, Sir; I've just checked

again and the man is simply not in our records. Maybe if we...rightful so, Sir, rightful so. But, please understand, I wouldn't have bothered you if it wasn't—"

St. Peter froze a moment later, his face lit with a smile.

"What a fantastic idea, Sir!"

"What's he saying?" Mr. Baily said.

Death shush him again.

"W-Will do, Sir, will absolutely do." St. Peter said, "Again, I am tremendously sorry for the inconvenience. Have a pleasant evening. Thank you, Sir. Be well."

St. Peter hung up the receiver only after being categorically sure that it had been hanged from the other side of the line. Then, when the blood finally finished coming back to his cheeks, the big bearded man took a breath so large he almost passed out by emptying the air out of his lungs. Suddenly, heaven seemed hotter than hell to him.

"Want me to open a window?" Death joked.

"Don't be funny."

"Well?" Mr. Bailey asked. "What did God say?"

"That unfortunately, we can't keep you here, Mr. Bailey," St. Peter said, solemnly, "since you don't show in any of our books and given that death can't place you anywhere, we will have to send you back."

Mr. Bailey sighed happily. "About time!"

St. Peter glanced over Death, who looked away avoiding making eye contact.

"Oh my! P-Please, don't get me wrong! All this was a very enlightening experience; the clouds, the gate with all the golden ornaments, the Serafins oozing through...whatever that thing is..."

St. Peter looked over his shoulder. "The tree of life."

"Yes, the tree of life, exactly, with the planets and all, everything, everything lovely. All very nice, very exciting. I couldn't be happier to have seen it with my own eyes and I am profoundly thankful for the experience and the time you gentleman put on solving my prob-

lem here."

"Mr. Bailey..." St. Peter said.

"In fact, as strange as this might sound, I am really looking forward to entering heaven next time!"

"Buddy, you are not getting it," Death said. "He has to send you back."

"No, yes I understand. I understand perfectly."

Death let out a short laugh. "No, I don't think you do."

"Mr. Bailey," St. Peter said, "we don't know where you came from."

"Yes, I understand. I'm not in your books, right?" Mr. Bailey said smiling.

"That's right. Which means we can't send you back like you. It will have to be as someone else."

Mr. Bailey kept smiling but his eyes were screaming in terror.

"See, there is no record of you here, none—"

"Or even of you dying," Death said.

"That's right, or even of you dying. We can't just send you back there to your old life because, quite frankly, and you'll have to understand me on this one, we don't even know where that is. See?"

"Wait—what do you mean by that? I'm me."

"Well, yes and no," Death said. "Someone misplaced you."

St. Peter shook his head to the creature. "You are not helping, Dani."

"Misplaced? What, my life? That's ridiculous! I've got a wife, children, a job, I pay my taxes with the government—"

"Not according to this you don't," St. Peter said, opening his book again, "there is simply no Mr. Bailey in any of our records."

"Check again! I demand you check again!"

"I've already checked like eight times, what do you want me to say? You aren't here. Sorry."

Mr. Bailey's face became so red Death took a step back. "Oh boy, here we go," the creature said.

"You idiots! You bloody idiots! How in heavens are you going to misplace my life!"

St. Peter looked down. "You have every right, Mr. Bailey. Every right."

"One goes to service, prays to who knows how many saints because even the doorman is a saint over here and for what? You misplaced my life! My life! My existence! Lost!"

St. Peter didn't know what to say, so he offered silence.

"You have any other jobs besides standing here?" Mr. Bailey screamed, half way up on the lectern. St. Peter was unsure what to answer to that.

"Well, do you?"

"No, no. I am in charge of the book and close the gate at eight at night."

"That's it? No cleaning, taking out the trash or doing the windows or something? Just reading that damn book and making sure the gate gets closed before going home?"

"Pretty much, yes."

"Doesn't sounds that difficult, does it?"

"Well, not if you put it like that—"

"Then how the hell could you misplace my life!"

Death put a palm on Mr. Bailey's shoulder. It was heavy and cold. "Easy buddy, Pete is letting you vent some steam here, but don't overdo it."

Mr. Bailey looked inside Death's robe and though he was staring at horror itself, he was pretty sure it couldn't have been worse then what the creature was looking back on his own eyes.

"Look, Mr. Bailey," St. Peter said, "this isn't as bad as it sounds."

Mr. Bailey was too busy hyperventilating to insult him for that one, so he just waved him to go to hell instead.

"Think about it," St. Peter said, "you can get another life. A new one. How many people get a second chance?"

"He's right," Death said. "The golden ticket right there. Not many get that one."

"I don't want a new life!" Mr. Bailey shouted. "I want my life! I want my old life back! It wasn't perfect, but it was mine! I worked hard for it!"

"That I cannot do, sorry," St. Peter said.

Death pushed a cloud next to Mr. Bailey, who took a seat.

"I demand to see the complaints book!" the man shouted.

St. Peter's cheeks got red.

"This probably wasn't Pete's fault," Death said, "it is a big organization, you know. Maybe one of the angels screwed up."

Mr. Bailey was shooting knives at St. Peter.

"Hey, maybe was one of my guys for all we know, right?"

"Yes," St. Peter's said, "we all have to check the names on the book before our shift; it could have been anyone."

"What, there is a page missing or something? You said there were no missing pages!"

"No missing pages," St. Peter said, going through the book one last time, then closing it. "Can't explain it. I just can't. I apologize."

"Bloody idiot."

"Look," St. Peter said, "we can stay here arguing whose fault it was all you want—"

"That is exactly what I want. Idiot."

"Or we can get you back. I mean, you will have to come back, eventually. Your choice."

Mr. Bailey sunk his head between his hands. "How I am ever going to explain this to my Karen..."

St. Peter sighed. "I... I don't think you can talk to your wife."

"Can I have a letter or something, explaining all this, so she can believe me?"

"No, you see... I meant that you won't be able to speak to her, literally. At least not for another five or six years, until you learn how to speak again."

Mr. Bailey's face went white. "What?"

"I doubt she will buy it anyways," Death said, "The whole 'honey I came back from the grave' it's just so cliché that—"

Mr. Bailey pulled St. Peter by his ropes. "What did you just say?"

Death broke them apart. "Hey, buddy, come on now, Pete's just doing his job."

"I am afraid that all returns have to be made

to an unborn child,” St. Peter said, straightening up.

“Unborn child? Unbor—Unborn child?” Mr. Bailey repeated. The words were the same, but the way he said them made St. Peter push a button under his lectern.

“Please, understand—we don’t have much else to do here.”

“You mean I will have to be born again? As someone else?”

St. Peter nodded.

“I already have a mother and a father, a life, you can’t end my life because of some technicality, how is that fair? How is that even fair?”

“It is in the contract,” St. Peter said.

“What contract, I never signed any contract!”

“You were baptized, weren’t you? Otherwise you wouldn’t be here.”

“What does that have to do with anything?”

“It is a legal binding—” St. Peter began.

“No no no, it’s a tradition,” Mr. Bailey interrupted. “It’s a tradition.”

“It’s a legal binding,” St. Peter said again, shaking his head. “You entrusted your immortal soul to us in conscious agreement. Well, technically, it was your parents, but still—we have rights to enforce it.”

“And what about my rights, uh? Do I have the right to be treated like this, like I never existed?”

“You have the right to live a full life.” St. Peter said, “That is what I am trying to tell you.”

“Yeah, but not my life, not the life I have, but someone else’s!”

St. Peter shrugged. “A life is a life, Mr. Bailey. I don’t see the issue here, honestly.”

“Of course you don’t, because you were St. Peter and you will always be St. Peter! Through all existence! You even got made a saint! What did I get from the deal? Half a life and a new one I never asked for!”

“Buddy, I don’t think you are seeing things in perspective here,” Death said. “This is an incredible opportunity, right here. A second chance to start over. Unique on its kind, man. Think about it.”

Mr. Bailey got up and walked around, wanting to kick something, but only found clouds.

Death floated towards him. “Some of the people I bring in sometimes don’t even get to enjoy half of what you had, you know.”

“Stop it.” Mr. Bailey said, “You are not going to convince me this is working out in my favor because it clearly isn’t.”

“Only trying to help,” Death said. “Want to dwell over it, go ahead. Be my guest. If you ask me, you are getting a bargain; take it while you can.”

“My baptism...” Mr. Bailey muttered to himself, then turned around. “Have a copy of it? My baptism? There is your proof of life, that I exist! Must be attached to the contract, right?”

St. Peter shook his head. “It’s an oral agreement through a ritualistic binding. There is no written proof of your existence, sorry.”

Mr. Bailey gave it a thought. “If there’s no written proof, no documents that can prove me existing, why I am here? How’d you know I am even baptized?”

“That’s the thing,” St. Peter said. “The fact that you are here means you are bound by the agreement.”

“See any atheists around?” Death asked.

“No.”

“Well, there’s your answer.”

“I should have become one.”

Death laughed a little. “You don’t even want to know where I have to take those. Forget it; you are fine here.”

After a moment of sheer anger that eventually transpired into angst, Mr. Bailey began to cry until there were no more tears to be shed. He went on walking around in circles, while St. Peter spoke with two archangels who had come to his aid when he pressed the button in his lectern. All they did was stare at the lost man and shake their heads in pity, then left.

Mr. Bailey came back to the lectern.

“Let’s have it,” he said.

St. Peter wasted no time. “Four children are on queue. Three boys, one girl.”

“Will I be able to remember anything of my previous life?”

“Normally, no, you can’t. But, this being a special—”

“I didn’t ask what would normally happen. Normally, you wouldn’t misplace my life, would you?”

St. Peter remained quiet and limited himself to getting the files ready for Mr. Bailey.

“Well?” Mr. Bailey said. Waiting.

“You will be given the choice to remember your previous life, if you want to.”

“How do I remember it then?”

“Through a trigger.”

“What’s that?” Mr. Bailey said.

“An event that will unlock all your previous memories.”

“Do I get to choose which event?”

St. Peter nodded.

“All right,” Mr. Bailey said, “the first time I open my eyes. There.”

“That’s... no, that’s not how it works.”

“Oh, for God’s sake...”

“Careful, Mr. Bailey. You are still in Heaven.”

“Fine, what’s the trigger mark?”

“We have... let me see...” St. Peter said, going through a stack of papers. “A moment please. Here, it can be a dream, a first kiss, a near death experience or a blow to the head.”

“So, all I have to do is make sure to have one of those and I will remember me, right?”

“Yes,” St. Peter said, “but you won’t know you have to do one of those to remember you are you. Is this too difficult?”

“Kind of,” Death said.

“Right.” Mr. Bailey said, “I go with the kiss then.”

“A Casanova!” Death laughed. Mr. Bailey didn’t find it funny.

“Very well, Mr. Bailey, a kiss it is. Now, boy number one, Mark—”

“I want the girl.”

Death and St. Peter stared at each other.

“Problem?”

“No, none, Mr. Bailey,” St. Peter said, “I just assumed—”

“I already tried to be a male, didn’t I? Since I’m getting another shot at it, why wouldn’t I want to experience the other side of things?”

“Mr. Bailey!” Death laughed, patting the skinny man’s back. “Who would have guessed! That’s the spirit, pal. Way to go!”

Mr. Bailey smiled at death.

“As you wish. Sign here please,” St. Peter said, offering him an ivory threaded paper with a golden pen to do the honors. “Then here, and here, and over here too, this last one in print please.”

Mr. Bailey signed without even reading the documents.

“Will I be pretty?” he asked.

“What women isn’t?” St. Peter said while he wrote an exception notice on top of one of the forms.

“You aren’t answering my question.”

St. Peter lifted his stare. “Yes, you will be a very pretty girl. But that’s up to you, ultimately, isn’t it?”

“Obviously.”

“Well, Mr. Bailey, here is your copy,” St. Peter said, handing him a small pile of documents and a ticket. “Now, if you please follow that path over there you will find a purple door, knock twice and wait. Someone will take care of you. Again, my most sincere apologies. Hopefully, this new life you are starting today will be more peaceful than the previous one.”

“There was nothing wrong with my old life,” Mr. Bailey said, offended.

“Of course not; that is not what I meant.”

“Yes, I know what you meant,” Mr. Bailey said as he walked away.

“No hard feelings, uh buddy?” Death said, but Mr. Bailey was too far to hear the creature.

St. Peter began filling the rest of the forms then wrapped them inside a cylindrical container and pushed them through a pneumatic tube system.

“And that’s that,” the big bearded man said.

“Well, Pete, that was fun, but I got to run. You are still on for Saturday?”

“Nah, I’m going ice fishing with Matthew.”

"Where to?"

"Over the Lethe..." St. Peter began, then stopped, looking at his copy of the forms he handed to Mr. Bailey.

"Something wrong?" Death asked.

"Depends; if his—I mean her parents manage to get to Mars or not."

"Did you put him on a space ship?"

"Eighty-four years from now, yes. I wasn't looking, he didn't let me read the file either."

"Yeah, the man was in a hurry."

"There aren't any other people in the vessel, just the girl and her parents..."

Death whistled. "Rotten luck."

St. Peter kept reading. "Wait, wait; here we go, there is another ship. They are part of a convoy. Four ships to be exact."

"That many?"

"Yes, a large mission apparently."

Death snapped its fingers. A list materialized from a puff of horror, floating in front of the creature. "When you say this is?"

"Eighty-four years from now."

Death went diligently through the list. St. Peter began sweating. Death stopped at one of the paragraphs and went over it a few times, then put the list away and sighed.

"Let me guess, his ship is the only one that makes the whole trip."

Death nods. "So, first kiss. Does that mean a partner has to be involved somehow or—"

"No, a first kiss. I didn't say first kiss, I said a first kiss, didn't I?"

"Yeah, I believe so." Death shrugged. "What's the difference anyway? A kiss is a kiss."

"It can be the first time her mother kisses him after being born. It can be the family puppy licking her face. It can be one of the nurses. It can come from anyone only in his case—"

Death coughs. "Her case."

"Her case, it's going to most likely come from her new parents hundreds of light years from any other human being at drift through endless space."

Both St. Peter and Death remained in silence

for a few moments, thinking on Mr. Bailey looking at the stars from a bio-dome somewhere in Mars, every day, every night, for the years to come.

Finally, St. Peter took a pocket watch from his robes and slid the lid open.

"My, my, look at the time."

"Yes, I should get going," Death said. "Wanna play poker on Sunday?"

"Sure, who's coming?"

Cabrera Brothers HIGHLIGHTS

GAMES Exciting news for video game fans, the Cabrera Brothers Company is currently involved in the development of a second game in the world of Dogeron Kenan. The project, simply codenamed *CYPHER 2*, will be a re-introduction of the character from the first game *CYPHER: A Cyberpunk Text Adventure*, launched late 2012. At the time, the game pushed the boundaries of text adventures with images and sounds that created an interactive environment like no other title in the genre had done before. With this new entry in what is quickly turning to be a series of games set in the world of NeoSushi City, the brothers plan to carry on that promise as they get ready to bring a preview earlier this year to a selected group of fans and players.

FREE BUNDLE MAGAZINE Starting this July, the Free Bundle Magazine website will feature a downloadable version of the magazine (you are holding the first issue in your hands!) with stories and articles you won't find anywhere else. Thanks to the New York Public Library and the Internet Archive, the magazine can be read through our website (<https://www.thefreebundle.com/>) or via your favorite online book store (Amazon, Apple, and Kobo).

Cabrera Brothers

FREE BUNDLE

FANTASY & SCIENCE FICTION

<https://thefreebundle.com>